Antidisestablishmentpseudoterrorism:

(an interrelated collection)
(a novel)
(a long word)

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To Be The One

Part One

My attention is as focused as the headlights which shine on the road unraveling itself before me. Never mind that those lights are somewhat off center, so am I. It has been a long time since I've looked inside myself. The waning from four to two lanes of the New York State Thruway a few miles back reflects a similar change in my own inner landscape, the acknowledgment of which I've been aggressively avoiding for an even longer time.

I've been feeling diminished for seasons, lost.

There are no lights ahead or behind anymore, maybe even no goals anymore, nothing to navigate by but what one can just barely see ahead. The gray pavement rolls under my wheels and the left corner of the windshield seems to swallow the yellow dashes which divide this highway's lanes. I am the source of my destination, I am my motivation, we must be very quite in order not to startle our elusive subject.

And obviously, I've been watching too many Jacques Cousteau documentaries.

An old man once told me something I'll never forget: "Wanderers find solace in the stars and in themselves." I was very young, and sadly I only remember him as a faceless, nameless voice. Was it Jacques? In all these years I still haven't figured out what it all means, while I wander wondering. I've often thought that perhaps I just made that something up and it's unimportant, that I am its source and destination too.

The feeling that something is going to happen has been teasing me

all week, something. It's a subtle taste in my mouth due to anticipation, it's the vacuum left by an idea one momentarily forgets and then loses because it's searched for too earnestly. Maybe it's wishful thinking. Maybe it's a vision of the future. Maybe I'm just confused and it's unimportant.

I wouldn't be able to so dramatically tell if I am not confused, or whatever the opposite of confused is because perhaps I've always felt confused. It's so confusing. Additionally, I have a hollow sensation in my gut that has nothing to do directly with my physical state. The cause: a rather evasive, rather attractive, extremely delightful, magnetic young lady and myself had, shall I say, a slight misunderstanding.

So she's one of my best friends and she dumped me, it's unimportant.

Perhaps I have this foreboding that something is going to happen because of a recurring dream I had once, once. This guy mistakes his dreams for reality and reality for his dreams, but when he's dreaming he's really dreaming and when he's awake he's really awake, except actually he's hooked up to a machine feeding him sensory information that determines how real his realities are so it's all unreal.

Is there a connection between this dream and how I've been feeling all week? Does this dream have meaning? Nah, it's unimportant as well.

Someone once said to herself that "The ones who live in the desert never climb mountains or sail the currents of a crystal clear night." Of course, I might have just made that up too, so possibly I'm the one who said it after all.

Being that I am the source of my destination, the subject and the observer, and the source of my motivation, the object and the non-compliant.

Breaking routine is not a tendency I usually gravitate towards. Yet, I have somehow unplugged myself from the machine, from day after day after day of endless automation, to find myself before irreversibly changing into someone without inspiration, emotion, or identity. Often I've wondered how I became a beast of burden, was I born into the role like everyone else? What have I chosen to accept as unchangeable? I'm a member of a society of individuals who doubt their right to question the circumstances of their lives, and I'm no different usually. That scares me, and it should.

There's a grandeur in things of limited duration, like a summer sunshower, when the clouds part for only a moment and the light can be seen not only on where it shines but on its whole path from sky to earth. There's a grandeur in the smell of just cut grass at the end of a summer day, and in a weekend that one knows is so short that it hurts.

Upon embarking this morning an hourglass was turned over somewhere to empty its upper contents and fill its lower chamber to insure that everything is finite. Still, my goal is to forget that the timepiece even exists, a goal perhaps attainable. Then I'll have achieved something worthwhile, a timelessness, a moment of personal suspension, if there really is such a thing, and at the least a pause to catch my breath because right now I really need such a thing. So, with a desire to do something good for myself, to begin struggling towards ridding myself of the many undesirable yokes I've somehow acquired and to see if I can see who I am or who I'm not, I've decided to graze on possibility.

I fear that I fear having something in my experiences so meaningful that I'll compare that experience to others, creating a personal standard of comparison way above any I now presently admit to denying I possess. I fear risk, I think, yet I must find out precisely what I fear. This suspicion frustrates me because the safe way is to always look outside and never look in, never know yourself and live that life of a stranger instead.

Like I said before, chances are I'm confused along with everything else I am. It's just not so easy to tell anymore.

Perhaps naively, I've attempted to place part of my life in a box, separating what I'm forced to do and what I've always done, they're so similar, from who I really am. It could be dangerous, I may find out like I deny I suspect that I've lost my sense of self. I have compartmentalized, disengaged for a while from what I know to be the negative influences in my life which seem to be so very abundant, influences so insidious that they're practically invisible to me.

I've always felt as though I live in a huge, callous, invulnerable machine that extracts all hope of joy, self realization, and possibility from me slowly. Sadly I look around and see that the machine is actually the negative people I know who are embodied in that metaphor, who are truly very callous but also truly very vulnerable and meager human beings in reality. They inflict in order to distract from their own self loathing.

The means of transportation which right now propels me northward has a name, the Cullen Mobile. Somewhere between a comic book hero's

chase car and some secret government research project that's eating up the economy lies the Cullen Mobile, sort of.

The only person who feels comfortable driving this hearse, this tomb on radials, is the same guy who I was able to persuade after much ado for permission to drive it. The only request was that I bring it back with no damage.

How anyone could notice any additional damage I haven't a clue. The doors more than seem to be hanging off, impatiently waiting to fall to the ground, the dark green paint is barely hanging on, each window is so dirty that the world looks dirty, rust can be heard munching and gnawing away at the body when it's quiet in the morning, and there's not an undented piece of green metal in between.

No damage? Sure.

I've been having these flashes while driving, snapshots of the truck breaking up at fifty-five miles an hour and me being found along the roadway still strapped into the driver seat holding the steering wheel.

I'm in a vehicle constantly going through the vibrations of re-entry and that will never touchdown. There are two seats in front without armrests, in between there's a mound of once light tan, canvas drop cloths piled almost to the ceiling. This forms a cab, the cockpit, two very cramped cubicles to either side of the mound.

To look at someone sitting in either seat from either seat one has to lean a little forward around the drop cloths. And they really are drop cloths, each heavy and colorful, sprinkled with little beads, long streaks, and splotchy spatterings of misapplied paint which have become

part of the fabric.

At the foot of the passenger seat are a few half buried power tools, covered by old, half eaten lunches in brown paper bags, half finished immortal Styrofoam cups, and tattered pieces of half the county atlas which disintegrated prematurely due to the truck's internal atmosphere.

The engine cover against the brown dashboard, in front of the seats and drop cloths, has a pool of spilled coffee shimmering with each bump in the cup wells on its top which used to hold beverages. Though only a few inches deep and wide, and though the brown liquid on top is pourable, if one were to dare venture into that abyss, one would see that this coffee wellhead is ancient. The deeper, the thicker the caramel, smelly goo, and the bottom must now resemble amber. With a little time and dehydration, what is semisolid on top will turn into the stickiest gum to be covered by some newly spilled coffee at some later, unavoidable date.

The coffee abyss traps things like pennies, washers, ratchet sockets, screws, nails, keys, and whatever else falls in accidentally. They sink, disappear, and no one is the wiser. I once touched its surface unintentionally and then removed the keys from the ignition. They were stuck as though with epoxy to my skin for two weeks.

Amost all instrumentation on the dashboard is nonfunctional and unilluminated, blackened out by hardly accessible, green bulbs which all directly quit soon after the gauge which each was assigned to expired. The capsule cannot transmit any more telemetry to the astronauts. We're breaking up mission control, come in mission control!

A few miles back I had a thermometer and speedometer left, but the thermometer needle sagged suddenly and with a silent scream detached itself to fall to its death, and is now laying within the little, clear windowed cage like some dead zoo animal. Promptly the light which illuminated the thermometer exhibit winked out forever, leaving me with a dead zoo animal in the dark, companion to three other dead zoo animals/once operational gauges also in darkness.

Now I only have a speedometer. The radio, fuel gauge, oil pressure gauge, battery level gauge, and windshield wiper soap spray have all become long forgotten, strange memories of luxury. I'd thrown away all the white Styrofoam cups which were on the dashboard because I could barely see outside even worse than I can barely see outside now. In each cup was a semi-solid lump of some penicillin producing, blue mold. Though I'm not admitting that I sneaked a peek.

I was afraid of touching anything else in case it might be alive, like the countless, connected shelf of cinnamon Danishes that are still on the dashboard, stretching from one side of that brown plastic shelf to the other. The Danishes are brown too, so I'm not bothered that it's a living, breathing Danish shelf and that there might be one or several mouths along its length. I'll just pretend it's not there, and it won't try to eat me, that's our agreement. I really wouldn't be surprised if some sort of from-food-evolved, intelligent life exists in here somewhere, some sort. So what people have been eating for lunch in here interests me occasionally. When I'm occasionally confronted with some nearby growl.

The windows are opened full to relieve my nostrils from the stench:

damp mustiness from rain getting in through holes in the roof somewhere to the rear, fumes from all the paint in back, a stale vapor from the curdled coffee forming the brown pool near me and from the coffee in the white cups on the floor, and an aroma from somebody who is passing gas, or something.

I had a Thermos but it fell a while ago onto the floor by my feet and seems to have disappeared. Earlier I had simply pushed all the junk on the driver's side floor out the door at a truck stop because I couldn't find the pedals. It fell with a grunt in one unit. Before I could get out and pick up all that junk, it scampered off under the truck. When pulling away onto the highway, I thought I saw out of the corner of my eye the pile I'd accidentally set free moving slowly across the empty parking lot towards a garbage truck which was going to empty a dumpster and take that pile of junk to paradise.

I try to forget the fact that the floor beneath my feet isn't bare metal, isn't worn carpet, and isn't covered by any kind of rubber mat. When I cleaned the floor in front of my seat I discovered that the floor is made of dirt. Dirt. DIRT! The floor beneath my feet is loam.

Exactly where my Thermos went is a mystery. Some horrifying critter probably has consumed the contents and the Thermos by now after dragging it back among the clutter which fills the rest of the truck beyond the two front seats and mountain of smelly, but colorful, drop cloths.

A motorcycle zooms by out of nowhere at some incredible velocity just a hair below the sound barrier. Its single, bright white headlight

momentarily illuminates the inside of the truck, a truck with no real internal lights except for the green speedometer. I quickly grab the opportunity to glimpse the sprawled out form in the passenger seat by peering over the drop cloth mound. He's completely out, with huge Cullen feet resting on the clean edge of the dashboard. Why do people go to sleep with Danish monsters at their feet?

I picture the rest of the passenger, my cousin Ciaran (KEER-IN), uncomfortably slouching in the passenger seat that, like the driver seat, doesn't adjust from its ninety degree, uncomfortable posture. The most important detail about Ciaran which has struck me since last seeing him is his sheepdog-like, unparted brown hair covering half his face. How he can see at all is intriguing. Lost behind us amongst the myriad of step ladders, scaffolding, plywood, sheetrock, empty five gallon stucco and paint cans, plaster rubble and possibly my Thermos, is my other cousin. I hear static so he could still be alive.

Thinking about it right now, it seems funny how we've known each other for such a long time, as intimately as brothers, but are, well, almost strangers in many regards. But in a brotherly way of course. What we have in common is beyond blood, it is the cement of relationship through memorable experiences, and a shared need to be needlessly mischievous, off the wall at the most opportune and inopportune moments, of course unconventional, and at times just plain weird.

It would be a great exaggeration if I said that Ciaran and Joe's

company reawakens a part of me I usually think is dead, the carefree child, a part of myself I cannot often easily find. It would be a great exaggeration to say that I feel safer in their company both as an individual and as a man who once was and still wants part of himself to be a child. But it would all be true.

Since every journey requires some sort of preparation, only after careful planning, practice, research, more practice, arrangement, pre-practice, and more practice did we carefully, mathematically, and astrologically determine that we were thoroughly, absolutely ready to go camping.

Then we toasted confidently to the anticipated experience: the wilderness, the spaciousness, the clean air, the chlorophyll, the quietude, to being men so prepared for adventure that we would fit in like rollicking grizzly bears in the woods; predatory cats in the jungle; predatory birds in the open skies; rabid, predatory rabbits in the green fields and so on. Maybe I've exaggerated a tad, but only by a very small tad.

O.K.

So maybe we weren't THAT thorough, THAT cerebral, THAT deliberate, and probably got carried away with all our toasting. Actually, we didn't plan anything at all except the date and rental of equipment, but we've set out with a positive attitude and lots of heart, which is all that really counts I hope and hope.

A very old man talking about the nature of life once told me that

"Son, the miles continue..." He never finished the sentence because he was old and probably never finished any of his sentences anymore. I've always wanted to know what he meant, what else he might have said, what the end was to all his unfinished sentences—which all seemed to have an ending so familiar that he didn't even have to speak it anymore—and just who this old man is that I remember so vaguely yet so permanently.

I've forever felt a sense of persecution within the machine, driving me to always be on edge, always be ready for the fall, always do my best for fear of anything less being detrimental. Yet how quickly I forget my victories and how hard it is to forget my mistakes. I've found a song which is very familiar, so descriptive it's nearly autobiographical. Deciding I'll drive for a while, rather than be driven, I've been singing the song in a low voice for miles and miles. I've even been singing it for years.

"I've been lost inside
Empty space in my heart
And some things never change
How it hurts me and
How it's tearing me apart
And it just goes on and on."

Sometimes I feel as though I've always had an empty heart, that I'll never be able to and haven't loved, or even grasped what love is. But that's unimportant. "But that's unimportant" is my way of dealing with something missing which I know is very important, to diminish the knowledge that I'm lacking something I really know I need. The fact that I use that expression so often only impresses upon me how much I lack, but that's

unimportant too. I always have my song.

"Can you read my mind?
Take a good look at my face
Could you take the time
Just to stand here in my place?

What if I'd been the one to say goodbye? Goodbye Could you smile when inside you just wanna cry? Want to cry Can you read my mind?"

I've turned inward in rage many times in my life, out of frustration, from need for strong defense against that which I cannot avoid. It has never really worked, never solved the problems which I'd hoped would be so easily avoided, like loneliness and the fact that I often don't like where I am. Turning inward to blame has never resolved that sense of persecution which for me exists on a scale as large as the amount of numb people in the world. There are times when the injustice is so bitter to acknowledge because then my limitations must as well be acknowledged. Though I realize this insecurity, I cannot understand it. Futility is unimportant.

"When I hear your name
Feel so cold deep inside
Still it's hard to explain
What your love meant to me
They say time will heal the pain
But it just goes on forever.

Can you read my mind?
Take a good look at my face
Could you be so blind
Did you think I'd just give up?
What if I'd been the one to say goodbye?
Goodbye

Could you smile when it hurts so deep inside And it never fades away?"

I continue humming the melody slowly, softly, hearing the words in my mind and deeper.

"You're driving me nuts!" Ciaran hoarsely shouts around the drop cloths at me. When he shouts at me, I know has something on his mind. I know what annoys him.

"What?" I ask, feigning innocence.

"Humming. Humming, I hate humming." he growls, "I keep waking up to you humming and falling asleep feeling like a bee in a hive. SING the damn thing, I'd rather fall in and out of sleep like a drunk in a bar with a lousy singer murdering every song."

I have only been singing one song, I'd like to correct. But one must be careful, since I've been intentionally humming instead of singing during the past hour or so when I thought he was awake because I'm not the type to blatantly expose my guts to anyone and I know what annoys him. It has just been so quiet that even our arguing is good conversation. When Ciaran gets mad, the slightest of things which usually only slightly annoy him can then infuriate him. He's mad now because he just woke up after hitting his head on the door when I intentionally ran over a pothole so he could hit his head on the door and wake up mad. See, I know what annoys him.

I continue humming when I think he has dozed off again, looking for another pothole on the gray, rolling road that races beneath us. Of course, I'll wait till I'm sure he's sound asleep before waking him up

again. Some people are so touchy! The things one has to do to converse.

I don't easily get annoyed so long as I'm not being coaxed to conform to someone else's standards. My aggravation becomes expressed very creatively, usually I'll test my aggravator's gullibility with whatever pops into mind. I get really mad when I see someone preaching that EVERYONE should live THE right way, obviously that right way being defined self servingly, and when that someone is truly convinced that everyone MUST conform for their and society's benefit, even though no invitation was given for that person's opinion. So I say it's all relative, each must first decide for their own self.

I like people who accept me for who I am first and foremost. Ciaran is very different from me, where I'll walk away if the whomever that's being annoying is really demented, he won't. His expressions of dissatisfaction border on an intentionally and potentially unlimited rudeness. We're completely opposite in those terms. I don't overwhelm people with my judgment of them. Ciaran overwhelms people who overwhelm him with judgments, which I admire, but it's just not me. I make an asshole out of them without letting them know.

Yet I'm never the one to say the right thing to some goofy girl, the right line that she's dying to hear and will do anything once it's heard, no matter how cheesy the line sounds to me, no matter how stupid it is to exist oneself as a push-button. And I'm always the one to hear goodbye, left standing alone with the sun going down, glad to be alone

again because if it doesn't work out it wasn't going to work out, but still looking anyway for that another who is similar but of the opposite. Ciaran just walks away first, before the girl knows he knows she's going to leave—maybe even before she knows she's going to leave—and definitely before the sun goes down. It's balance I guess, I too often wait for goodbyes whilst he'll wait for nothing and just takes off in any direction. He's footloose and I've seen a lot of beautiful sunsets.

Even if our differences are not really equatable, that's how they appear often enough. He's a year older than me and seems to have something to do all the time, spontaneously, carelessly, while I get stuck ruminating my own skull's contents. It's possibly similar for him, but what I see is the external, so my perspective is narrow, yet I know him well. What I see in Ciaran are exploits of daring do I envy, especially involving escalators. But there are some things I'd never want to do, like: swinging from a basketball hoop to fall on his wrist spraining it, being bitten by a rabid dog which resulted in getting the thirty or whatever number of shots subsequently, and being hit by a car three times when younger.

I could see maybe once.

"Where the hell'd you get that?" I cry out in alarm at what the headlights of a passing eighteen wheeler reveal. The jelly doughnut stops

in mid-air. I hope it wasn't on the dashboard. Because the Danish monster is a unified consciousness and will kill you for eating a part its totality.

Ciaran throws the jelly doughnut out the open window into the black night and it skids down the side of the truck as it falls, carried by air that seems to rush from somewhere ahead of us though we're actually doing the moving.

"Then why the hell did you let me eat it? No wonder it was crunchy...I'm going to die...I just ate a petrified doughnut. What's your dad do, collect them?" he grumbles on the other side of the drop cloths. I found another pothole a few minutes ago. So I let him eat it. Some people are so touchy. It's not my fault that a person wakes up suddenly and grabs the first thing they think is edible. There's a rumbling mumbling coming from the passenger side as well, even after Ciaran stops his complaints, because I'm still humming.

But it's not my fault he woke up hungry though, I just wake them up.

"SING the damn song, damn it! I feel like I'm watching a baseball game and both teams are wearing the same uniforms and everyone's wearing the same number. I feel like I'm trying to make a snowball out of dry sand. Damn it!" Ciaran very loudly enunciates, trying to control his fervor.

"Count my mistakes, and the heart aches..." I begin quickly, to appease, before he lays an egg.

"Since you said goodbye." he adds. I grin, he has been listening to me when I thought he was asleep.

How many young ladies have I driven away out of fear of intimacy? That's ice too thin to even think about treading upon. Now I realize that yesterday was probably another goodbye, very likely, in a long series of goodbyes. I squint, I don't want to deal with it right now, I haven't the focus.

It's unimportant.

So what if I self destruct in relationships purposely? I do it well. Actually every girl I've ever met romantically wanted to control me or be controlled by me. Some people are so warped. It's hard to know until you know, and then you wish you didn't sometimes. I guess I'm learning the hard way, through experience, the only way really. Experience is a good teacher.

Anyway, much of the past is too painful to remember, too much of a waste of time. I don't delve into anything I don't think I'll be able to control when it surfaces. I try to forget what's worth forgetting. It's damage control.

I remember being in a friend's car very late at night, or early in the morning depending on one's point of view. We almost ran over this one legged man who appeared out of nowhere grinning. He was crossing the street. It was magical because I couldn't remember the incident at all until the next day. Every time I picture the one legged man I see his face so clearly, and his face is my own face.

From behind there's a noise that's noticeable above the spinning

hum of the truck's tires and my own low humming that I make sure Ciaran won't hear or he'll tear my heart out. I raise an eyebrow and look into the darkness behind me through the rear view mirror. There's a huge momentary racket like a wall of stone, glass, and metal falling to the ground extravagantly.

"BLOODY FUCKING HELL!" a voice with a still present accent swears.

I laugh quietly.

I turn down the offramp to a public rest station that I've been coveting for the past ten miles. In the dim yellow light of the empty parking lot I park the truck, turning everything that works off. It's not a long list.

I jump out onto the ground after opening the driver's side window so I can open the driver's side door from the handle outside. I slam the door from outside deliberately, hoping that will somehow violently jar whatever is wrong with it back into operation.

Going to the back of the truck, I open the rear doors and peer into the darkness. From the gloom there's another loud racket as someone emerges struggling with something. Spilling onto the ground from the truck is a torn, tattered, soiled and stained Joe Cullen.

Joe gets up and throws a small stepladder he has been wrestling with back into the darkness from which he has emerged. He's covered from head to toe in sawdust, paint chips, and pine needles.

Why there are pine needles in there I haven't a clue.

Even in a dirty gray sweatsuit Joe still looks suave, dapper, and composed. He doesn't sweat, he perspires. He uses a fork with his

left hand, pointing the tip towards the plate, and always eats with a knife. Even in a sweatsuit he looks, well, English.

From around the corner of the truck Ciaran leaps out at us and both Joe and I jump bewildered. There's nothing like a large surge of adrenalin to wake one up.

Ciaran looks at Joe from under his mop like growth of hair and smiles.

"What'd you do, make a nest?" he prods, looking Joe over from head to foot. Joe ignores him deliberately and starts brushing himself off. Ciaran starts patting him down as well, maybe a little too enthusiastically, until Joe is standing before us with a small pile of pine needles, paint chips, and sawdust on the pavement at his feet. I have to physically restrain Ciaran who's still pretending Joe has stuff on him and won't stop patting him lightly.

After finding the rest area's men's room, which is in a small brick building with a MEN and WOMEN side in the middle of the large empty parking lot, and which has raccoons scurrying in and out as if to maybe relieve themselves as well but actually because they're busy taking apart the garbage can inside, we return to the parking lot.

"Whatever." Joe carelessly remarks as we walk back to the green monster truck.

It's great to be the only people in the whole world at this particular rest area at this particular moment, I think as the three of us round the building.

Looking at the truck in the middle of the parking lot, which I'd parked there because I thought it was funny to park as though that was

the closest parking space, Joe shouts out in alarm. There's a towtruck of all things hooking its chains up to the rear of the truck. We run full speed across the parking lot.

"HEY!" I yell as I stop at the rear of our vehicle. I step back as Ciaran and Joe catch up.

"Woah!" Ciaran exclaims.

"Christ!" Joe whispers.

The towtruck is deep black and shiny new. Standing between the two vehicles is a little man about three foot five, dressed in black, with a black jumpsuit on and a black, plain baseball cap. He stops walking to my truck to look at us for a moment without the slightest hint of doubt.

"Was this your car?" he asks in a high voice, crawling halfway under the green monster to continue doing whatever he had been doing.

"This IS my CAR...." I correct loudly. Car, truck. Whatever, as Joe might say. The little man doesn't respond.

"This WAS your car." he announces as he stands up and rubs his hands together. He keeps looking around as though expecting something, and we keep looking around when he does this to see what it might be, if anything. I'm quickly starting to feel ridiculous, and angry. Ciaran keeps mumbling something behind me, then Ciaran steps past me and puts a finger on the little man right on the name patch on his jumpsuit.

The patch says Killer.

"Listen Killer," Ciaran half growls, obviously really pissed off the way only Ciaran can be counted on to get instantly pissed off. I know this because he's talking with his teeth clenched. Ciaran is a big

boy, he powerlifts competitively and flosses with piano wire.

"Listen killer," Ciaran repeats, "What the FUCK are you doing?" Ciaran is really, really pissed off. He has uncensored himself.

"This is an abandoned car." Killer explains as though we'd asked a question with an answer so obvious that we're now morons.

"Look around you!" he fervently exclaims with a sweeping gesture that seems to encompass the whole world. I think to myself that we're now going to beat him to a pulp and no one will ever catch us. I look at Joe, who opens his eyes wide and makes a swirling gesture with his forefinger next to his right temple. Crazy is being generous, I tell myself. I pull Ciaran back before he has the little man as a late night snack.

"I've only been parked here for ten minutes," I try to reason, "And I'd like to leave." The little man turns away, oblivious, and walks towards the rear of the glossy, black towtruck.

"Where the hell are we, Oz?" I ask Ciaran and Joe in amazement, "Hey, am I speaking in a language you don't understand?" Killer appears between the trucks again.

"Grab him!" Ciaran suggests in an anxious whisper. I look down on our mentally incomplete friend. Shaking his head as if in pity, and smiling while looking around, Killer holds out his right hand, rubbing his palm with his fingers.

"Call the police." I tell Joe, who quickly turns around and sprints towards the building and the pay phone between the two restrooms.

"Tell them someone's stealing our truck, a short, stupid munchkin!"

I add. Ciaran applauds my newfound rudeness by patting me on the back as if to say "Good, lets get to work and tear this little guy apart like wolves would a carcass."

The little man frowns, still looking around definitely at things only he can see, and then turns around to scoot into his cab, definitely seeing our intentions. No matter.

"Let's get him." Ciaran announces officially, vaulting past me. The little man shuts his door and locks it before Ciaran can get there. Killer starts lifting the green monster via controls within his cab.

"Oh no!" I yell out in disbelief. We're going to be abandoned to live with the raccoons. Slowly the chains tighten under the truck and the hoist thing begins to rise. But there's the sound of bending, rusted, weak metal coming from under the truck too and suddenly the chains become slack though the hoist is still rising.

"They're coming!" Joe yells across the parking lot from the payphone. Ciaran's pounding on the towtruck's driver window with his right fist and elbow. Inside, Killer is making weird faces at him. From the back of the towtruck I pick up a tire iron and walk in front of the vehicle. I'm ignored as the little man disappears, ducking down in the towtruck cab.

Ciaran's cursing at him without spaces between his foul words. Then the little man suddenly appears again and I'm speechless. He's wearing a leather helmet and goggles, the kind bi-plane pilots used to wear. Joe comes running up, looks in the cab, and jumps up startled.

"What the hell is wrong with this shithead?" Joe yells at me. How

should I know. I'm still standing, holding the tire iron, in front of the tow truck. My grip becomes limp, but nowhere near as limp as this lunatic's grip on some kind of understandable reality. Then I drop the tire iron because there's just no point, there's just so much irrationality I can handle.

"This guy's nuts!" Ciaran yells in frustration, "He's absolutely gone!"

Joe walks over and picks up the tire iron. With a big swing, he breaks
a headlight, then another. Just as he's about to smash the passenger window
of the tow truck, I yell at him because they're coming. I mean they're

REALLY coming.

"Here they come!" I formally announce, pointing down the Thruway.

A whole fleet of flashing lights race towards us, spilling into the parking lot. Now that's service.

The little man starts up his truck and begins grinding the gears. Ciaran jumps off as Killer pulls away with screeching tires and dragging chains. Scores of white and black state police cars and officers zoom by us, sirens silent, blinding lights pulsing, flashing, and spinning. In moments the tow truck, state police cars with their confusing lights, and one insane Lilliputian named Killer are gone. I move to stand next to Ciaran and then I look at him in amazement as he watches everyone disappear.

"You're a mawrucker!" I tell him, because he is.

"What the hell's that?" he grins, rubbing his elbows while looking down the highway in the direction our friends went.

"I don't know, I guess it's what it sounds like." I answer, a little puzzled. I've been saying that word for years, ever since my friend Moozer

taught it to me and not only do I not know what it means, it might not even be a word. Well, it is now, where ever Moozer is now.

"What just happened?" Ciaran asks Joe and myself, a little delayed, post traumatic realization.

"I don't know, I think I'm going to forget the whole thing." Joe admits, shaking his head in disbelief. That might be a good idea. All the cars disappear and all that's left to see by are the parking lot lights and an occasional car moving along the Thruway either northernly or southernly.

A plain white, four door sedan pulls up as we turn around. There's a state police officer with his state police officer/Smokey the Bear hat, sunglasses, and a hand held megaphone sitting in the car.

"What seems to be the problem gentlemen?" his deep bass voice calls out over the megaphone. And the windows of the car are barely even open.

"Oh boy, not another one." Ciaran laughs, "He's one of you're people Joe, go talk to him." Joe declines, so I walk up to the officer.

"Ah, well," I begin as the big, sunglasses at night wearing, black state police officer rolls down the window, "Someone tried to steal my truck." I can't go into anymore details without laughing or crying hysterically. After a moment he puts the megaphone to his mouth just as a call comes over his police radio. How he can see wearing the sunglasses at night is beyond explanation.

"Which way did he go?" I think the officer asks, with an incredible volume of sound. He must have superior sight and the worst hearing. I'm only guessing at what he precisely said because I'm standing too close

and the noise from the police radio in the background garbles his words.

"WHAT?" I ask loudly since I'm now deaf.

"You don't have to shout." he announces over his amplification.

O.K., maybe he's only deaf to his own voice.

On the other side of the Thruway, heading south, a shiny back towtruck approaches, illuminated by the spotlights of the pursuing police vehicles. I just squint in amazement because it's all so strange. The officer turns on his flashing headlights and siren and speeds off. I walk back to Ciaran and Joe and shrug.

We watch as the white sedan with headlights alternately flashing and blue light inside spinning wildly cuts diagonally across the northbound lanes, across the expanse of grass dividing the two halves of the Thruway, and as it plows into the side of the speeding towtruck. I gasp and cringe as the sound of the two vehicles colliding and all the police cars behind braking reaches me.

There's no smoke or fire, just a still wreck in the middle of the southbound lanes illuminated by at least twenty spotlights from the jumbled cars surrounding. Then there's a deep, familiar voice from a megaphone.

"SURRENDER!" it announces, almost like an after thought. From out of the union of the two vehicles steps the state police officer who cannot hear his own voice, megaphone in hand, sunglasses still on, holding the little man off the ground by his shirt collar.

"Who was that man?" Ciaran mumbles after they all leave with the wreckage and the prisoner, as we turn back to the truck hurriedly before anything else occurs. I check for any serious damage to the chassis

underneath the green monster. Who am I kidding? I can't tell. Everything looks just as bent as before all this happened. I crawl out from under the green monster, handing Joe the flashlight he had given me, and indicate that everything is all right, just to assure my companions.

"Who WAS that man?" Ciaran repeats. Yeah, who was he anyway? Joe shrugs.

"Whatever." Joe says. I, myself, am at a loss for words. We continue on our journey with the promise that I will not stop at any more rest areas. And I swear that I won't.

People who say that the young don't think of death are wrong. It is on my mind often, mortality occupies me. Sometimes it hurts to realize that there are such limits on life, but then I realize that such time limits only make things so much more precious.

"What?" Ciaran calls back to Joe from around the pile of drop cloths.

Joe mumbles something over the static of his radio.

"WHAT?" Ciaran yells, then pauses, "Hey Joe, I can't see you! Smile!" It's hard to explain to a stranger the type of humorous prodding Ciaran has with Joe. An outsider might call such humor offensive because they would think that such a statement would be meant as a racial slur. I guess it all depends on intent. Ciaran's intent is to tease Joe, Joe as an individual, with whatever will work, all things being equal. And

all people particularly.

It's really no different when Joe makes fun of Ciaran's hair, or the paleness of Ciaran's skin in mid winter, or mine as well. He calls us albinos, which is pretty accurate. Two points for Joe. We share relationship by blood yet people wouldn't think we're related because of our differences in skin tone. Of course there's a whole series of presumptions there which really are meaningless. Only strangers see each other in broad, general categories, we see the details only as details, as positive assets. There's a thump and a groan from Ciaran. Joe has good aim, and an additional point. Of view too.

"I've seen better hair on a rabbit!" Joe cries out. I laugh though the pun is really bad, or maybe because the pun is so bad. We're full of them. I hit a huge pothole and swerve halfway across the road. It wasn't intentional this time.

"Who taught you how to drive, James Dean?" Ciaran asks me.

"You're driving's so poor you can't even pay attention." Joe adds from way behind.

"It would be just our luck that when we crash, we'll die and you'll come out without a scratch." Ciaran predicts.

"Can I die too, please." I plead.

"Well son, maybe." he answers in a paternal tone. His reply reminds
me of a conversation we'd had a few years ago about hoping for something
bad to happen because it then won't happen because someone wanted it to.

I don't really understand it, but supposedly desiring what one really
doesn't desire jinxes what one pretends to want and therefore what one

doesn't want but just pretends to want, so it won't occur. It sounds logical to Ciaran anyway, not that either of us is particularly superstitious.

There's a long silence. Ciaran seems to have dozed off and Joe is fiddling with his radio, trying to sort out a station from all the static, which impresses me as being very similar to finding what one truly wants in life's soup of possibilities. So I'm the only one awake again, it's just me, what can be seen directly ahead in the truck's off center lights, static, and darkness. I'm used to such an environment.

Surrounded by interference and obscurity, the miles continue.

Once there was a time when life seemed simple, when each day was an adventure, when everything was new, exciting, breathtaking. That was when I was a child. I didn't feel as though the world was imposing itself upon me, and I lived for the not so distant future. Now I feel pressure and myself being bent when I really haven't chosen to be bent. The world—all of us obviously—want to kill every individual. People regard their fellows as disposable and their separate selves as vile.

Things are more complex now. I realize that it's me who ultimately determines my responses to what occurs in my life, that I am the cause of many of the anxieties I try to ignore, that often I choose not to choose. That I can be harmful to myself is a delightful paradox.

I really worry about the future and choice, or more precisely, the lack of choice. I used to doubt I could ever choose the proper road, but long ago I stopped giving a shit. Fate can go to hell. I used to hear a voice within which would say "If someone we're in my place what would they do?" or "Maybe I should have waited."

Both voices sound so unconvincing now, incomplete, and actually are other people's voices. I'm learning to discard the garbage from childhood that I've been imprinted with. Choices based on my own convictions, not on how I think others would choose are the true choices that will benefit me. Even if lately I've been procrastinating.

Now I simply say "Whatever, this is my life, back off." That's not to say that the choices that should exist do, but they will, I will make them. In reality I couldn't care how things turn out so long as I did what I could. That's what matters most to me. I'm consumed by my circumstances. Someone has decided that I don't deserve to live. Someone has decided that no one deserves to live. Actually everyone has made that choice. Especially economically.

It has never been more clear that humankind is suicidal, imposing, callous, greedy. But if I can criticize, there is still hope. I know my personal values do not include the value of money as a means in itself, probably even as a means at all. I hate money. It kills people, or more accurately, people kill each other by means of money. Money drips with the blood of the victimized. No money, no food. I don't want money, I don't understand money—or I understand it too well—and I don't think a piece of paper should be a prerequisite for someone to obtain the

necessities of a happy life. I don't think pieces of paper should determine the likelihood of fulfilling a person's needs.

The fact that everything is a lie also bothers me. Of course everything isn't a lie, but take for instance the idea that all people are created equal. People say they believe it and live it, but when I look around, it's obviously just words to the great majority. For everyone to be equal, certain things must be shared, not hoarded. We are taught to be grabbers though, each for their self, no matter how inhumane the results.

And the evening news tells us to hang on one more day while nobody cares.

"We need money for the toll." I'm informed by my co-pilot, finding the relationship between what I just thought and what Ciaran has just said rather painfully amusing.

"Don't do what you don't want to do unless you must." I mumble after receiving the toll card that looks slightly munched by something and the change Ciaran has counted out. It's ironic that money can be called change yet that's precisely what money is there to stifle.

"What are you babbling about?" Ciaran asks after a moment. I grin at the obscure reference though I can't remember what movie it's from. It's hard talking to a pile of drop cloths, but often it's hard for me to talk at all, in the best of circumstances. That's probably why I didn't bother to move the cloths backwards. The fact that there's probably no room back there is also a good reason.

It comes to my attention that Joe has moved up behind the two front

seats, to squeeze his head and shoulders between the pile of drop cloths and the ceiling. I only know this from his breathing in the darkness.

I feel kind of weird. I'm in a total darkness that's as though there could be an immensity of room behind me, like I could be siting in a seat in an empty coliseum.

"Here." Joe tells anyone.

"What?" I answer with Ciaran.

"It's a Thermos," Ciaran states disinterestedly, after receiving it from Joe, "Your Thermos." If both of them only knew what it all means, if they could be told about the mystery of the Thermos disappearance and reappearance. It might be too much for them.

I take the Thermos. It seems to have claw and teeth marks on it. Approaching the tollbooths which block the highway like a barrier, the truck begins to brighten inside. I look at Joe, he's staring ahead blankly. He has the ten mile stare, or maybe a hundred miles.

"He's contacting his superiors on Pluto." Ciaran jokes. Ciaran reaches over and shoves Joe, a push maybe a little too hard. Joe's covered again with pine needles, paint chips, and sawdust.

"What's that for?" Joe snaps out at Ciaran, looking around a little dazed. Ciaran avoids several attempts by Joe at retaliation. I purposely choose a machine lane and slow down. Stopping in front of the yellow rectangular mechanism, I feed it the ticket and dump the change in its basket. I take off before it's done counting, setting off a loud bell.

It bothers me that it's so much easier to interact with a piece of mechanical junk than with a human toll collector. But I won't support

the economic confinement so obviously symbolized by a person trapped in a small space. Have we lost our social skills? Did we ever bother to learn any?

"What'd you hit the jackpot?" Ciaran wonders, looking back through the passenger side-view mirror. The truck quickly becomes dark again, everything inside disappearing. All light except for the tiny, green speedometer inside and the headlights outside are left behind. The amount of traffic is practically nil. We're in the hinterlands. There's a silence that lasts a long time, until Joe starts mumble-humming.

"I know that song!" Ciaran suddenly blurts out, relieving some kind of pressure inside that builds up whenever exposed to humming. I look through the pile of drop cloths that I can't see and give Ciaran, who I can't see either, a "You're acting weird even for you!" expression that I know he won't see, characterized by raised eyebrows and a wrinkled forehead. Joe continues to hum, I know he's not going to reveal the song. I picture Ciaran going nuts silently.

"I KNOW that song!" Ciaran suddenly growls as the pressure builds up within him again. I laugh low.

"I heard that." he warns, "It'll come to me." Either it will come to him, Joe will stop, or Joe won't stop and Ciaran will explode. There's a loud spitting noise as Ciaran expectorates deeply out the window, giving

me the heebie-jeebies. His way of dealing with Joe's humming? Joe stops and may or may not have disappeared into his lair.

"How much longer?" Ciaran asks me after clearing all throat and nasal passages.

"Well, son..." I answer in a deep voice.

"No, how much longer?" he insists, louder.

"Well son, it all depends on the tides..." I answer patronizingly again.

"Just shut up." he decides, stifling me. He knows when I'm in an obnoxious mood. After a long silence, with Ciaran and maybe Joe listening, I clear my throat. I can't actually tell, but I imagine Ciaran leaning toward me a little tense, waiting expectantly.

"Ten minutes." I reveal. Joe claps his hands from somewhere in the back and exclaims "Bloody fucking good." I think it's an English thing. We pass a green sign with big, silver, reflective letters. EAST DURHAM. I slow down just a tad because East Durham can be missed if you blink.

"Hey Joe, you see my boots back there?" Ciaran calls back. There's no answer. I imagine Ciaran's head appearing as a light shadow above the drop cloth pile, that the last remaining dashboard light slightly illuminates the front of the truck and not just me.

"You look weird man, green." he warns me, as though I'm sick or something. I also imagine, in glances, Ciaran peering back into the gloom. Suddenly something slams into the dashboard, and something slams into the half opened window.

"Joe, you asshole, my boot almost went out the window." Ciaran yells

back mad. There's no answer for a moment.

"Sorry." Joe apologizes, throwing from the darkness behind us a ball of window glazing putty that splats and sticks to the windshield. Ciaran must have been wise enough to have kept ducked down, or it would be stuck to him.

The road is now two lanes in opposite directions, divided by a double yellow line and bordered closely by dark forest to each side that leans over the highway, forming almost a complete tunnel. The belly of the beast. The place that's the best. Occasionally, every five or so miles, there's a mailbox marking the primitive driveway of someone's house. But soon these are left behind. We are entering a place where people are only visitors, a place where people are the foreigners because people have set themselves apart from all other biology. The winding dirt road we're looking for is a route which leads to our past. I slow down noticeably, looking to each side for some sign.

"It's up a little more." Ciaran informs me while struggling loudly with his footwear. Mr. "How much longer?" giving me directions. I know exactly where I'm going. I pass it.

"You passed it." Ciaran announces in a tone I think to be amusement.

I have passed our past. So I turn around by making a broken U-turn across the dark highway.

"There it is." Ciaran adds.

"YES!" I yell. It's a yell of annoyance. I turn off the highway and stop at the mouth of the dirt road.

"It's so narrow." Joe notes, "I don't think it's wide enough." I turn to Ciaran for advise. I know he can see me though I can't see anyone. I'm looking green man, weird. My crystal clear green dashboard night

vision is only in my imagination, a symptom of my green dashboard light illness.

"Sure it's wide enough." he assures. I don't trust his judgment at all, but I'm convinced that if he's wrong I can blame him, as if blame does any good anyway.

"I've seen maps with wider roads." Joe jokes as I inch us forward. Right away we hit a deep hole full of water. Muscling out of it, the bottom of the truck scrapes the ground, then the nose of the truck levels out. The only things visible ahead in the headlight's beams are green branches swooping down and green, overgrown undergrowth sprouting in the middle of our road.

This looks weird man, green, I think to myself.

"Maybe we should leave the truck here?" Joe suggests as the nose dips down and the details of the vegetation melt into a blur as we descend sharply. My stomach is left behind. I think we're at a sixty degree angle that's heading towards ninety.

"Hit the brakes!" Joe screams out, hammering my shoulder with his fist. Vegetation disappears under the hood as we accelerate exponentially. Large branches overhead scrape the roof, rocks bang against the undercarriage, holes swallow and then spit the tires out continuously.

Pressing the brake doesn't help, the wheels just lock up and send us sideways, so I take my foot entirely off the pedal though all my senses tell me not to. I'm on a runaway train going fifty miles an hour with no tracks to guide.

"No! The brakes!" Ciaran yells hysterically. I try them again only

this time lightly, but the wheels lock and the rear starts to kick out again. I'm thinking about jumping out before we fly off a cliff or crash into a fallen tree or one that's still standing, but abruptly the road levels, causing the truck to slow down drastically and all the stuff in the back to shift in one loud clatter. The way is more visible here and I see that there's not much farther to go, the road ends, becoming so narrow that it disappears as thick trees seem to move together in front of us. The effect is impressive. We're being swallowed by nature.

"Why isn't he slowing down?" Ciaran asks Joe, as if I'm the madman who can't be reasoned with. I open my eyes wide and listen to the adrenalin fueled pounding of blood in my ears. We're running out of room ahead and still going faster than we should. I floor the accelerator and feel Joe's pounding on my shoulder change to a painful grip.

"SLOW THE FUCK DOWN!" Ciaran commands in a shriek. I have a flash of clarity, I can see everything as though it is daylight. Ciaran scoots down into a crash position, the forest surrounding is aware, Joe braces himself on my shoulder as we zoom forward. We won't fit between the trees ahead illuminated in the headlights. I shake off Joe's painful grip that has my right side numbed and I slam on the brakes. All wheels lock and the truck lurches to a skidding stop.

The engine sputters and stalls, there's a silence so still that I think I hear the heartbeats of my companions. The headlights now shine on still, green foliage, undergrowth, and dark, hidden places. We seem to have come to the end of that unraveling road, on a certain level, the end of one thread on some great tapestry. The future from here is in

any direction. I know that upon stepping outside I will be placing myself in an environment where I won't be able to ignore those voices of conscience I continually distract myself from.

With a click the interior of the truck is illuminated. Joe has turned on a flashlight and like a spelunker emerging from a cave, he moves forward from way behind. He must have been thrown back there.

"Sure it's wide enough!" he sheepishly mimics Ciaran repeatedly.

Despite everything I want to do it again. Ciaran, in the light of an unsteady beam of bright white, sits up from his crash position and smiles.

"I think we're below sea level." he laughs. Joe wacks him in the head with his palm lightly and disappears backwards. I take the keys out of the ignition but drop them accidentally. Bending over and searching, I find that I can't find them. It's another Thermos incident. I don't tell anyone, I've a spare set hidden in the visor anyway. Unless some mutant truck monster finds them and wants to take in the sights, we should be all right.

Ciaran finishes tying his boots and after several attempts, pushes open the passenger door with his shoulder and tumbles out. I hope he remembers to pull his ripcord. I follow Ciaran's lead and open my door, from the outside of course, and step down to the ground on shaking legs. I'm in waist high underbrush that I can only feel.

Trudging to the back I meet a Satan-like Ciaran illuminated by the red taillights. He's fumbling with the door lock. I push him aside politely with my shoulder and open the lock by putting my finger inside the hole where the button used to be that would normally open the lock.

I'm always afraid I'll get my finger chopped off. The doors squeal open and out rolls Joe wrapped in and struggling with a drop cloth. We aide him in his struggles and begin to gather our gear.

"Did you see the ax?" Ciaran calls from the side door around the corner of the truck.

"Did he say ax?" Joe exclaims, bolting upright in the red light. I see I'm not the only one who doesn't think an ax is appropriate. Ciaran appears above both Joe and myself as we kneel down readying our packs. Joe gasps as Ciaran lowers a full sized, thirty pound ax down to our faces for inspection. In the red light he looks like a lunatic.

"Mr. Pasacreta's ax." he states with reverence, lifting the axhead up to his face and looking at its edge. I shake my head in disbelief.

"What are you going to do with that?" I dare ask, standing up simultaneously, just in case. There are many just in cases which pop into mind, one being just in case my head gets chopped off. After all, it's a big ax.

"What's wrong with him?" Ciaran angrily asks, pointing at Joe who's laughing but trying not to make any noise.

"Who do you think you are, Paul Bloody Bunyan?" he asks, in between chuckles. Bloody isn't appropriate at all. At the side door lies Ciaran's pack, almost four times larger than Joe's and mine combined. I blink and close the doors on that side, and then on the driver's side, as well as all the windows. After turning the lights off, I return to the back blindly stumbling. I slip on something along the way. I can't see a thing and with my arms groping in every direction, I bump into Joe.

"Bloody hell!" he curses. He's always saying that. His shout echoes in the darkness. Above, a small part of the dark but clear, starry sky can be seen among the dense canopy. There's a terrible smell, and I suspect that it comes from what I've slipped on. I hope no one will notice.

"What's that bleeming smell?" I hear Joe notice sniffing. I picture his face all screwed up like he's bitten into a lemon because mine is. From around the corner there's a dragging noise, then a click followed by another click. A blinding light appears right in our faces, forcing us backwards a few feet. I think to myself that this is when we get abducted by U.F.O.s.

It's Ciaran with the flashlight.

"Oh." Joe answers his own question with Ciaran's appearance. The light goes out and all I can see are rainbow strands of light swimming in front to me. Then it pops back on directly in front of Joe's face.

"I'MGOINGIOBLOODYWELLKICKYOURASS!" Joe yells at him after batting the flashlight away. This shout doesn't echo at all, which is weird and causes Joe to look at me and me to look at Joe and both of us to look behind and around us at the darkness. Ciaran points the flashlight at the trees above, which is eerie, and at the ground and our packs, which is helpful. Unfortunately he's more concerned with the trees.

"I think there are BATS UP THERE!" he yells crouching, all of a sudden panicking, causing me to jump and look to where he's pointing. I see nothing, neither does Joe. I shake my head in sympathy while putting my pack on. Joe already has his on, and down on the ground next to Ciaran

is Ciaran's pack. It looks too heavy to even consider lifting.

"Why are all our packs green?" Ciaran wonders after standing up, forgetting about the bat problem. He checks all the straps, zippers and ties on his backpack.

"Are you staying here all year?" I joke, teasingly pushing him with my knee, only because he has placed the ax down as he attempts to lift his pack. The pack itself is probably heavier than me with my pack on. He totters for a moment until his knees lock underneath the great weight. While leaning down to pick up the ax, he totters again but doesn't fall. If he did, he'd look like a turtle put on its back, struggle upside down. Or if he fell forward, he'd look like some guy who has had a piano dropped on top of himself.

In the light of Ciaran's revolving, sweeping, and blinding flashlight, we stop all of a sudden to just look at each other silently. I wince, expecting some strange noise from something carnivorous, hungry, and close by.

"Let's go." Ciaran whispers almost to himself. I'm disappointed because I was hoping for that strange noise to cut through the darkness and freeze our blood with fear. Oh well. Joe watches Ciaran start to trample a path into the deep forest where there's less underbrush, Ciaran seems to have forgotten us. Joe motions me to follow him following Ciaran. Realizing that the only source of light is leaving fast, I quickly stumble to catch up.

It's too quiet all of a sudden, except for our footfalls, the things crackling and snapping under our feet, and the underbrush's braking

as Ciaran forges ahead. I begin to yell in a loud melodramatic voice.

I can't take the smothering silence.

"So he went far, seeking DARK and INTRICATE places..." I yell, and as though addressing a congregation of skeptics, I gesture with my arms and hands violently at both my companion's shadowy forms as we walk. I'm falling behind.

"After a time, the sound of musketry grew faint and the cannon BOOMED in the distance." I continue though ignored, louder and with more emphasis on specific words like boomed. My words echo around us like the loudspeaker in an arena.

"The sun, suddenly apparent, BLAZED among the trees. The insects were making rhythmical noises. They seemed to be GRINDING THEIR TEETH IN UNION. A woodpecker stuck his impudent head around the side of a TREE. A bird flew on lighted wing." I conclude listening to the words "grinding" and "tree" which I'd screamed bounce and ricochet around us. I'm actually standing still in the darkness though I don't remember stopping, way behind. I had to let that out.

I listen to my words trail away into the void surrounding. I notice that Ciaran and Joe have stopped and turned around to come back to me. They stare at me in disbelief, amazed. Awkwardly, I shift my weight from side to side while they continue to gape. A weird chortling from above sounds and descends on us. We all duck down from reflex and fear.

"Stop it now!" Ciaran yells at me after losing the flashlight, "What the hell are you babbling about?" He finds the flashlight and sticks it in my face as though interrogating me. Joe's looking over his shoulder.

I know this because I can hear his laughter though all I can see is white light. Ciaran jabs him in the ribs.

"O.K." I concede, "I just had to get that out of my system."

Ciaran turns, dragging the ax and continues with Joe following. Rainbow strands of light swim in front of me again. I'm having fun already. Some people are so touchy.

"Stephen Crane." I whisper when I catch up, just loud enough for them to hear. Automatically both Joe and Ciaran spin around. Ciaran knocks me down by first blinding me with the light then pushing me while stepping on my boots. I land flat on my backpack, I can't move because Joe's holding my arms down under his knees above my head, and Ciaran's sitting on my legs trying not to fall backwards from the weight of his pack. Somehow I'm level, having indented the leafy ground.

"Listen you bastard..." Ciaran spits into my face, holding the light under my chin. He's joking of course, I think. He's been acting a little strange lately though. I struggle then totally relax, looking over Ciaran's shoulder.

"COO, look at the moon. Here it comes again!" I gasp, opening my eyes wide as though the moon is falling from the sky but looks beautiful and as though the chortling noise's owner is coming back to get us. The moon and sky can be barely seen through the canopy and I can't see anything else, but both Joe and Ciaran look up. I figure one distraction or the other would work.

With a light shove of my right knee upwards, I upset the delicate homeostatic relationship between Ciaran, his pack, and gravity. He falls

to the left of me. Joe lets go to dive for the fallen flashlight and ultimate control over night, day, obscurity and clarity. Joe finds the light and I follow its beam while propping myself up on my elbows. Ciaran is lying on his back, arms flaying around.

"He's stuck on his back like a turtle." Joe exclaims.

"Screw you!" Ciaran snaps viciously. He's too proud to ask for help though. Quickly tiring, Ciaran stops moving and just stares up. I follow his gaze. The moon is a suggestion behind overhead branches. He's calm now.

"Look at the moon," I direct, "Do you know what Henry Fleming might say?" Ciaran begins to growl.

"What?" Joe asks, not to receive any answer but so I can repeat what I'd just said. Joe's too busy throwing bits of twigs from the ground onto Ciaran to bother listing to what I say the first time.

"He'd say..." I pause, "The moon was PASTED in the sky like a silver wafer."

"That's it!" Ciaran cries out in desperation, "I'm going to kill you Bob." He struggles to right himself but the backpack is still too heavy. Joe continues to throw things on him like leaves and pieces of bark.

"Who's Stephen Crane?" he asks me absently.

"My barber." I answer. Ciaran bursts into another fit.

"I'm going...to...kill...you..." he repeats as he loses strength from fatigue. It's very dark outside the bubble of light, the cone of illumination that the flashlight creates. In this cone we are protected

from darkness. Peering into the void I get an eerie feeling.

"You know, we could be surrounded by ninjas and not even know it."

Joe whispers while scanning our surroundings and still throwing things onto Ciaran.

"Or SASQUATCHES!" I yell loudly, which would be really exciting.

"Get me up." Ciaran mumbles to us.

"What?" I tease, knowing he rarely if ever asks for help.

"You heard me, you bastard." he mumbles louder. He has a defeated look on his twig and leaf covered face. Joe has almost got him buried. I dig out an arm, Joe pulls up from the frame of Ciaran's pack after finding it, and we manage to right him like some capsized galleon. Immediately Ciaran grabs the ax from the ground and I wince. For a moment he seems to weigh it in his hands, but then grabs the light out of Joe's hands and turns silently, perhaps fuming mad, perhaps laughing inside. I can't tell, he's been acting so weird, almost as if he has the green dashboard light madness too.

As the light departs, we fall back into formation. The forest is deathly silent except for the noise of our footfalls, which are like ripples on calm, dark water.

Part Two

To be surrounded by so much unseen life is very disturbing, almost as though some sort of ecological, collective consciousness is present, a biomass ununderstandable in its form of being. If all the animals, insects, and vegetation were heaped together, plus something else, something invisible to any sense but intuitively there, an intangible, that collective consciousness would resemble something more solid. But it goes beyond any such simple representation and it's there.

The synergy between all the pieces of nature is confusing to me. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It's so easy to ignore the totality, easier to tear apart the big picture like everything people touch, so easy to dissect and therefore insulate oneself with that which is simple and unchallenging. Nature is also confusing because I know I'm not a part of it anymore. Generally, nobody is.

Often I can only see nature's brutality as life is snuffed out in an instant and created just as quickly. It's anthropomorphism, which is too often used as an excuse to divorce oneself from one's compassion anyway, yet assigning the natural world human values is dangerous. Dangerous to nature especially. The memories of furry, fly covered carcasses, of floating and bloated, glassy eyed, dead fish, of lightening crushing a young tree with the strength of the whole sky, and of the biting death of winter, leave me very personally cautious. But I will not make the value judgment, nature is nature.

I know there's balance; birth with death, growth with decay, grace

with horror, a balance set to a rhythm I cannot hear, a poetry of unceasing cycles I cannot interpret. I often feel I'm a disorganizer of that poetry, species wise. Nature is an endangered place. We have our cities of concrete so dead, so dirty, so sterile. And we pretend that the lawns and trees along our sidewalks and around our crowded dwellings are something more that potted plants. The philosophy of the age is that nature isn't compatible with human existence and that's why we're dying with the planet. That "Us or Them" mentality exemplifies our violence against the natural world. As the planet goes so goes man.

Humanity could live in accordance with nature, nature could be at our back doors, all around. Humanity could be humane. I'm reminded that there are no special rules here, now, in the real wilderness, where there are animals, old growth, a sense of life. Man is narcissistic, man wants to sterilize all life but himself, to be the only species, man wants to be god. As though the stagnancy and imprisonment of eternal peace is desirable, as though a being that knows everything yet is apart from what it is conscious of can exist. As though there's some benefit to a world blacktopped, without flora or fauna, without ecology. I'm wondering what woman wants. So I drop the androcentric nouns.

No, there are no special rules here, human beings are treated with a humbling unspecialness and I'm reminded that such treatment shouldn't be corrected. It is not our place to correct so many millions of years of evolution. Perhaps we fear the sudden appearance of a species of greater ability, or the appearance of something from within, and perhaps we should face the inescapable freedom which the human condition is. The natural world in human terms is savage. Extermination is the solution for a species intent on its own suicide. And man particularly is a beast.

I also know that much of what I see reflects my mood and that my mood filters to a great extent what I see. I seldom amalone in the deep woods for the deep woods scare me, which shows just how much of an enemy modern human has constructed nature to be.

"Now this is dark." I note to no one in particular.

"What?" Ciaran grumbles while turning around halfway and blinding me with the light.

"I said that it's dark." I repeat louder while coincidentally tripping because we're all still walking but Ciaran's shining the flashlight directly at my face instead of on the ground.

"Watch out for that log." he tells me, "Of course it's dark." To illustrate, he turns the light off completely and it's beyond dark. I feel like I'm hanging, suspended in a vacuum devoid of both substance and energy. Of course it's dark, I repeat to myself.

"Give me the torch!" Joe insists impatiently. The light pops back on. Ciaran and Joe are about thirty feet to the right, which really confuses me because they'd sounded so close.

"Torch?" Ciaran teases, "What do you think we are, welders?" I look at them puzzled because I hadn't moved. Ciaran points the light above himself then directly at me as I'm trying to get back to them. I trip continuously until I reach Joe, who's holding a long, thin, pole-like branch in both hands like a quarterstaff. We continue. Ciaran picks a piece of white bark from a birch tree, passes it to Joe, who passes it to me.

"You know, Native Americans used to use this a paper." I point out with a smile. I had to say it first.

Ciaran laughs, "You know one of us always points that out whenever we're near a birch tree." This is true.

My sense of direction is good, but not good at night. Getting lost here would be difficult though. The area we're in is actually an elevated plateau, almost wedge shaped, shear on two sides until they meet. The gradually sloping ground is our compass. I'd find a way to lead us off a cliff though, so I'm not leading. I gave away that responsibility to Ciaran whom I know will do an even better job, getting us lost that is.

"Do you think there were Indians here at one time?" Ciaran wonders, jumping over a jutting rock that's sticking up from the forest floor. I trip over it because nobody tells me there's a rock jutting up from the forest floor. Finding out yourself is sometimes hard. Experience is great teacher but bruises often. Indians? That's what I love, when someone has the confidence to ask me something they know I don't have the answer to but will answer convincingly enough to quench their curiosity but that someone won't tell me there's a rock in the way.

Joe's in front of me silently, holding his barkless quarterstaff horizontally. Ciaran quickly changes course, leading us between two very close birch trees which seem to be cleanly cut off where the light ends. A strange effect it is, as though all that exists is what can be seen, as though all around us are only shoulder high stumps of trees and above is nothing at all maybe. The ends of Joe's pole slam into the trees, clotheslining him to the ground as though he'd walked into a wall above his waist. I didn't see it coming.

Ciaran hits the ground too, laughing uncontrollably, losing the

flashlight again. I don't think it's funny at all, maybe, I don't want to offend Joe anyway. Joe gets up quickly, to run over and grab the flashlight, which instantly stops Ciaran's seizures. Joe knows there's more revenge in taking away the right to lead than any amount of physical torture. We continue with Joe in the lead, me at the end, and Ciaran in the middle, mad that he's not misleading anymore. I can tell he's mad by how closely he lets the axhead swing towards Joe's heals as we walk.

"I think there were Indians here once, judging by the names of places around here." I belatedly answer Ciaran's earlier question though I can't think of any Indian names at all. Like I said, I really don't know the answer either way. I know nothing. We crunch through some leaves for a while, Ciaran doesn't seem to want to talk.

"Joe, where are you leading us, to the Aztec lost temple or something?" I joke as we step in front of a wall of thick, thorny bramble. Joe scans around with the light, which reveals that we're surrounded by this thick, thorny stuff.

"It's a trap!" Joe yells dramatically.

"WHAT?" Ciaran also nervously yells before realizing that Joe's only kidding. I'm glad I didn't say what Joe said, with Ciaran in his present mood. For a few minutes I watch while Ciaran and Joe cut at the thorny bushes, one with an ax, the other with a quarterstaff.

"Me Joe Bearballs. Me know where to go." Joe calls back as he jumps through the new gap with the light. Ciaran quickly follows, and deciding that I'm not about to trip and get cut up in the bushes by taking my time,

I latch on to Ciaran's pack. I let go on the other side to find that we're in a field that has recently been cut. Like looking at a revelation, I stare up at the night sky in awe. Never have I seen so many stars against so dark of a sky, it's startling. A feelingawakens in my stomach and rises to midchest. My eyes almost water with this sudden inundation of possibility that has been slumbering unnoticed for such a long time within me. I feel lighter and younger, fresher, giddy from something inside that has unfrozen due to this humongus night sky.

"Come on!" Ciaran calls to me with a renewed zeal. I crunch my way after them on the bristles of this newly harvested, aromatic hay field. The moon sits just above the long, horizontal silhouette in the distance that is the far off tree line. Rising within the silver circle are two figures high above the ground. Approaching, I see Ciaran and Joe have climbed on top of a haystack the size of a small house. Two green backpacks are on the ground.

"We should hollow this out and make an igloo out of it!" Joe shouts down to me, "An unmeltable igloo." I shed my backpack and start climbing up by grabbing the cords which bind the whole stack together.

"The Big Bad Wolf blew down the house made of hay." I wheeze as I drag myself to the top.

"The wolf is always at the door." Ciaran adds. Both Joe and Ciaran are laying on their backs looking upwards. I follow suit and realize that it's going to take a lot to get me up again.

"Wow, a shooting star." I notice as a streak of light disappears forever. Another and another streak passes overhead. Will all the stars

seem to have fallen from the sky one day, leaving it empty?

"We're so small." Ciaran sighs, "Grains of sand." Joe sits up and points below at the opposite side of the haystack from where our backpacks are. I sit up to see that descending from high to low are another ten haystacks. We are on the largest.

Shaking Ciaran, who has closed his eyes, Joe jumps off. Ciaran jumps up amazed until he sees that Joe hasn't fallen some forty feet to his death but only a few yards to our neighboring haystack. I turn around onto my stomach and smell the hay deeply, which reminds me of horses, and I love the smell of horses. Ciaran joins Joe, they start yelling from stack to stack. Kneeling, I watch two silhouettes wrestling with a rising moon hanging just above them like a referee and a galaxy of stars to spectate.

The sky is spectacular. There is no night sky at home, just empty, black space I've never thought about. In this sky dreams can live though, because stars remind me of hope. Though unlikely, I wish inside as I see a shooting star streak by overhead that right now could be always, always and forever. Ciaran and Joe begin a race from one silver haystack top to the next. They're yelling like boys and I guess the child within, spontaneity, doesn't die, it just gets lost if neglected.

"He's catching up Joe!" I warn, unintentionally distracting him. With his head turned towards me and his eyes not watching the next gap, Joe doesn't jump far enough across it. Ciaran jumps over him as Joe seems to hang in mid-air for a moment then disappears. But in another moment Joe's back in sight, having caught himself somehow. Ciaran stops on the

last haystack and Joe jumps at him, knocking him down.

"Again!" Ciaran challenges, bending over breathless and pointing back at me. Joe nods between gasps. I watch as they have a harder time jumping onto each haystack because they rise gradually. Ciaran reaches me first, Joe jumps over a few seconds later, knocking Ciaran down onto me. I think Joe went slow returning just so he could get that shot in.

"Ughh!" I moan after pushing Ciaran off.

"Two in one shot." Joe bows, congradulating himself and holding up his arms to the sky, then dropping down onto his stomach next to Ciaran and myself.

"I might sleep here tonight." Ciaran sighs. Something small moves across Joe's leg slowly. I lean onto my elbows to see what it is. I see it, smile, but decide not to tell Joe just yet. Ciaran jumps to his feet.

"MOUSE!" Ciaran yells, sending Joe to his feet too, faster than I can blink. Suddenly I'm alone on the haystack with only the silver moon, a dark, starry sky, and silver hay. I quickly jump off too after realizing that I'm on a nest of mice, the motherload of mice nests, a mouse skyscraper. I land forty feet below onto a small pile of hay that flattens under my weight. Luckily I land horizontally, on my back, with arms and legs spread out so the impact seems to break all my bones and not just a few.

I think I bounce. Looking up I see that both Ciaran and Joe are standing over me. Joe's head is exactly centered in front of the moon, giving him an aura. I blink in awe for a moment until my bones stop

vibrating and my teeth stop chattering.

"There's probably hundreds of dead, squashed mice beneath him." Ciaran observes, which sends me to my feet instantly, dizzily. Soon we're crunching again towards our destination, packs on our backs, hay sticking to our clothes, and me with a tremendous numbness from head to toe. Stepping across the thin line dividing starry night and a forest of shadows, I find myself instantly blind.

"Now that's dark." Joe tells us from somewhere. The flashlight clicks on two inches from Joe's face.

"That's been said." Ciaran points out, lowering the light he must have taken from Joe's stuff.

"Looks like a rug." I say observantly, bending down and poking my fingers into the rusty pine needle floor. I'm feeling strangely disconnected.

"Yeah." Ciaran answers absently, then begins to guide us into oblivion. He leads us through a grove of particularly old pine trees and the light casts all kinds of weird shadows from their low, dead, horizontal branches. I'm whipped each time Joe must push one aside, but it doesn't bother Joe because Ciaran's doing the same to him. And nothing bothers Ciaran when he's in the lead, it sure seems. Ciaran stops to tie a lace. Joe graciously offers to hold the flashlight so he can see better.

"Where the hell are you going?" Ciaran calls after Joe, who for some reason wanders off with the flashlight before Ciaran has tied his boot. Now it's really dark, Joe's somewhere ahead shining the light at the high treetops. We rush to catch up before he gets too far ahead, but before

I have taken five steps the flashlight falls to the ground as a stifled yell rings out echoing. Ciaran looks just as puzzled as I feel when we get to where Joe was. Stepping ahead a few paces, with Ciaran shining the light from behind me, suddenly I step back. Ciaran pushes against my backpack and gasps, looking past me to where the ground is supposed to be.

The ground drops off sharply and we're standing on the edge. This is where the plateau ends but where we shouldn't be. This is where the plateau ends in many ways I hope but first where is Joe?

"Where the hell is he?" I ask Ciaran, who's scanning the declining leaf and tree covered, brown ground. There's a disturbed part of the slope, a line leading from where we are down the slope into the depths where the flashlight won't reach. It's a long, steep trip to take. From way below a small voice calls up almost lost amongst the trees along the way.

"Ciaran!" the voice yells, "I'm O.K., go down the middle, where I went. Just go slow." Several pieces of Joe's equipment are scattered down the slope, he mustn't have gone slow. I look at Ciaran, unfortunately. I know his expression, the "I don't have to be careful." shaking of the head, the "Because it's really easy no matter what Joe has said." smile, and the "I'm indestructible!" squint from determined concentration.

"I see him!" Ciaran exclaims, but I don't. Joe must have great night vision to avoid all those tree trunks. Yeah, I think he was lucky too. The path the Man Called Horse has made looks like the best way down, if

we go slow we should be all right. Ciaran's still got that look. He turns to me.

"NO!" I demand, but he can't hear me.

"NOT ME!" I refuse while stepping back. I may be stupid but I'm not dumb. Ciaran looks down to Joe, wherever Joe is.

"Oh, come on, look at Joe, he did it." he asserts. I doubt he sees Joe at all. I know how he wants to do this, with a running start, with fingers crossed, without regard for consequence.

"ONE." he shouts, approaching the edge as though going to jump out of a plane.

"TWO." I'd rather stay here anyway.

"THREE." I watch him launch himself over the edge and I follow right after. After all, he's got the light. I tell myself that I'm watching Ciaran from the ridge, which of course is a lie. It's a good sounding lie and I watch Ciaran from the ridge but it's a lie that only lasts a moment. I'm not good at deluding myself. How I start tumbling I don't know. How I wrap myself in a tight, backpacked ball I've no clue. That I'm going to die I'm certain. There's something big tangled up with me, hollering like myself. Roaring underneath and all around Ciaran and me, who I decide must be what I'm tangle with, are tons of leaves and snapping twigs cheering uncontrollably.

I'm falling for hours, spinning faster than any propeller I've ever witnessed. Then suddenly nothing is touching me, I'm flying through the air as though thrown upwards, I'm weightless. My blood pounds in my ears, my heart beats twice, clearly, slowly. Silently I smash into the ground

and skid for yards and yards, coming to rest paralyzed, even number. I'm lying on my back or maybe my stomach. My arms aren't moving, nothing's moving. I can't tell if I'm breathing. There's a moaning from far away that's starting to get on my nerves because it's getting louder.

"I found him!" an angel yells in the darkness.

"BOB!" the angel shouts while shaking me hard. I can't see a thing.

"I'm blind." I sob. I can't tell if my eyes are open or closed but everything's spinning and dark. Or maybe my eyes are just spinning, Still, everything's dark. Someone rolls me over and shines a light in my eyes.

"I can SEE!" I cry out. Someone sits me up so my legs are spread out in front of me in the bright light. It's either angels or aliens.

"Where are your harps?" I ask with a voice that doesn't sound familiar. Joe kneels down in front of me, I focus on both of him.

"You're not an angel." I tell him, upset, "You're an alien. Tell me strait Mr. Alien, what's missing, what's broken, and what the hell's the matter with Ciaran?" Joe checks me out to see if there's any damage.

"How'd you find me?" I wonder.

"You were moaning."

"That was me moaning? Where's Ciaran?" I add, my voice going up and down like a rollercoaster, not sure about anything and definitely not feeling wonderful.

"He's over there I think. You guys rolled right by me. Stay here."

Joe tells me. I'm not going anywhere. If Ciaran dropped the flashlight,

he must have been knocked unconscious. Good for him, he's definitely

a mawrucker of the ninetieth degree, whatever that means. I must have

a second concussion.

"Who's moaning now?" I shout to Joe ____osthe light disappears, I just want to clarify that it's not me.

"Ciaran." he answers as his voice trails away. I sit for a while. After a time I find myself standing and floating towards the flashlight, bumping into trees, tripping over fallen trees, and felling smaller trees I bump into that spring back up when I move on. Joe's frantically jumping from place to place in an expanse of ferns. I point to a boot sticking out of the thick growth. Joe comes over and pulls at the boot, dragging with it a foot, a leg, and the rest of Ciaran. He's out cold. I'm relieved that his ax isn't embedded in his skull or something. Realizing that his ax could have been embedded in my own skull, I kick him.

"Ow!" he laughs. I thought as much. I try to kick him again but I fall down.

"We better not be too loud, we may wake up the gators." I whisper for some delirious reason, "They may think we're crawdaddys...rawdads." Joe and Ciaran leave to gather everything we've lost along our descents. I don't even have my boots on. Or my pack. My head's not on strait as well. Shortly they return, I may have nodded off in the meantime perhaps. I put my boots on and stand up. I feel as though I'm on a choppy sea. Joe hands Ciaran his ax.

"You know, you could have chopped you're head off." he tells him.
My sentiments exactly.

"Or mine." I add, quickly taking my pack and avoiding both Joe's and Ciaran's eyes so they won't know how shaken up I really am at the

moment.

"You all right?" Ciaran asks me seriously. I nod. A day in the corps is like a day on the farm. We continue. I float behind Ciaran who's following Joe as we weave through the thick expanse of wet ferns and back to the forest. It'll take a few minutes for me to get the cotton out of my head.

"So, this is where the rawdads live." I tell myself as we leave the fern bog.

Sometimes I don't know whether it's better to feel nothing rather than pain and emptiness, but it seems I either feel one or the other. The emptiness is loneliness, a lack of something I've only glimpsed out of the corner of my eyes and felt only in the fringes of my heart. I'm an orphan craving the unconditional love of a family yet I'm too old now, I'm an elephant who has forgotten the location of the secret burial grounds and the time is at hand, I'm a crawdaddy on the run from gators with appetites insatiable and I'm sick of their bullying. But that's unimportant.

I don't know whether it's true that there's someone in this world for everyone. I haven't found her yet. At least I don't think so. It has something to do with luck, something to do with the mistakes I've made which I don't regret making but that I know now were mistakes. A pain comes from my past, from the wrongs against me, a past I'm just

beginning to shake off. The numbness of my extremities reminds me I have occasionally created numbnesses deep within myself to deal with those so familiar scars within. It's hard to de-anesthetize, to defrost and open up so that I might let someone in. I wonder sometimes if my heart is lost forever, scarred from being malnourished, to scarred from past experiences I try to forget. Sometimes I feel it's made of ice.

I also wonder where in Hades Joe is leading us.

"Now, I've seen this same tree three times in the past hour." Ciaran grates with anger.

"You mean we've been going in circles and you haven't said anything?"

I ask Ciaran softly, hoarsely. Loud words seem to make my bruises more obvious. Joe throws the flashlight to the ground in exasperation.

"You mean to bloodywell tell me that you noticed we've passed this tree three times already and decided not to tell anyone?" Joe cries out though nobody can see each other. Ciaran kicks the ground cursing and picks up the flashlight.

"I WANTED TO BE SURE!" he yells at us in rage. Never enrage the axman. Even Ciaran's loud words make my bruises hurt.

"So now YOU'RE going to lead. I think I'll wait here until you two make another lap or two. Tell you what, I'll time you guys..." I remark. I take a deep breath and sigh.

"Maybe I shouldn't lead," Ciaran advises Joe.

"I shouldn't either." Joe advises Ciaran. Both look at me. I sigh again, with a little growl.

"Well, I guess I'm elected." I shrug with dejection because when

you lead you can be blamed. From the tree we've passed probably more than three times I lead Ciaran and Joe. Joe is last because he doesn't seem to feel comfortable walking in front of someone who's swinging an ax as that person walks. Neither do I.

"Look, there's our footprints." I discover and point with the light at the bare, impressed patch of ground. Instead of going left as we'd always done I start towards the right of a huge fallen tree. It's quite an obstacle, which may explain why we haven't gone that way. The path of least resistance, I think dreamily. That's the great thing about concussions, they're so hard to admit, otherwise I'd admit to myself that I'm actually thinking groggily.

"Wait." Ciaran abruptly commands, "I don't remember going this way before." I guess he wants to be permanently lost but at least in familiar surroundings.

"That's O.K. neither have I, and I don't even have a before to remember." Joe mockingly consoles. Not all of us are reincarnated, I muse. They don't know that I'm probably going to get us so lost that we won't even recognize one another in this life, never mind anywhere else.

Part Three

It's easy to take some things for granted, like the comfort of one's bed, the freedom of one's self, and the integrity of the moment. For the want of my bed. All night my head was lower than the rest of my body and I dreamed of being a stalactite. Since I was asleep I couldn't do anything about it.

I like where I am, away, in the bosom of the land, in the wilderness. The integrity of the moment is strong, I feel alive, I feel I am in an environment that I've been away from for far too long. I remember trying to find comfort by changing position like a compass, but it could have been a dream. How I ended up in the bottom of my sleeping bag with my feet sticking out, where my head should have been sticking out, I wonder.

Maybe Joe and Ciaran did it, I hope. Otherwise I've got some really weird sleeping disorder. I stand up bathed in orange, no longer wondering why I'm not at home in bed in my room as when my eyes first opened. The tent is cramped, like a womb, so I leave its sweltering confines hoping to be reborn. The two other sleeping bags, green like mine, are rolled up just outside the tent's door. Someone has got to be the slob, I volunteer, I'll leave mine inside a mess.

Some idiot said "Let's make our camping things green so campers can easily lose them and buy more, and we'll make the tents orange so they can wake up bug eyed."

Cautiously stepping outside onto the warm gravel ground, I look around for Joe and Ciaran. I'm facing upstream so I look upcreek. There are more round, gray rocks to each side of the rushing water than there is creek. And where the rocks are nothing grows, where they end, the forest shoots up dramatically.

The water is fast, wide, greenish but shallow here. The creek is a vein of H₂O feeding the needs of its inhabitants, a precious ambrosia running through a land of arboreal time keeping, a land inhabited by the only, truly innocent.

To intentionally stem the creek would mean to destroy the lifeblood of the surrounding life, it would be an act of violence. Why I realize such facts in the morning I've no clue.

Joe and Ciaran must be downstream. I can't see downstream because the creek bends to the right sharply, sandwiched between two vertical stone walls which rise up hundreds of feet forming a canyon. The dense, green forest follows the rising ground which the creek has cut through like a blade.

The packs are hanging from a dead tree behind the tent to keep animals from getting to our stuff. Three raccoons and one pale possum are sitting on the branch which the backpacks hang from, seemingly scheming.

It's crispy outside. I take o deep breath and drink in the fresh air to begin to quench a thirst that has nothing to do with dehydration. It's quiet. The creek makes those sounds that can only be running water, a bubbling, giggling, mumbling that's hard to get used to. When I'm by the ocean I feel the same way, and I realize why Sirens are so imagined.

Some birds nearby call out. The light wind blows the yellows, reds, and oranges of autumn from the trees along the forest edges. The tent is on the very edge of the creek bed and forest, on a sandbar of sorts, with a huge mess of winter melt driftwood piled behind.

There hasn't been a campfire made, so Ciaran and Joe mustn't have gotten up too early. They would have been cold. Where'd they go? Maybe they're dead. I'd have a lot of explaining to do if they are. Looking down to the dew-wet, gray gravel, there are two sets of footprints leading towards the canyon bend. Leaving my socks and rolling up my pants, I follow the footprints which parallel the turning creek. Rounding the bend, the warm gravel ends and the walls of the canyon create a darkness.

The water is pinched between two huge, gray-red boulders that seem to have jumped off the top of the cliffs climbing up on each side of me to do what they are doing now, being obstacles. Since the footprints lead up to the boulder on my side, which is bigger then a house and half buried, I start climbing.

I reach the top and look over to see what's on the other side. The sun seems to press me down against the rock with its radiance and I can't help but smile. This is one of those moments that shine, trivial, internal, the sun is my source.

I'm at the top of a waterfall, and far below is a square arroyo that seems too protected for the sun to ever reach directly. The surrounding walls must be four or five hundred feet high if measured from down there. They meet across from where I am. The forest hangs over recklessly.

To the left are steps, big steps, about three feet high each, leading

haphazardly downward through the mist which hangs in the air and hides most of the canyon's bottom.

"Ciaran!" I yell down like Orpheus. My voice seems to die and fall below.

"YO, BOBBY!" a small voice answers. Enraptured, I begin climbing down the unnaturally cut stairway of dark gray rock which is more suited for someone twenty feet tall. Obviously this once was a quarry. I have a lot of fun jumping down each step as fast as I can, feeling like Jack after he climbs the beanstalk, or like one of the wee folk doing whatever it is the wee folk do.

The mist isn't visible though I know I descend through it, above is clear blue cerulean. At the bottom, the last step is just barely above water level, a dark water that fills the whole floor of the arroyo.

To my left is the rising canyon wall that's dark, sweating, and dripping subterranean moisture. I catch myself before jumping into the possibly deep depths mindlessly, having jumped down so many stairs and after having acquired a strange momentum I find is an effort to interrupt.

There's only one other piece of land down here, a rock jutting up from the center of the water almost mushroom shaped with several shelves in its shape, a strange, primordial monolith. The stone here is dark like charcoal or black, unpolished marble, and the water smells minerally hard. The diving water loses its shape as it falls, turning into a silver rain that cascades excitedly into the water.

"I never thought a place like this could exist." I whisper to myself

like I'd whisper the most confidential of secrets. It's like being digested and caressed.

"Hey Bobby!" Joe waves from the rock in the water before jumping off.

"It's better than any swimming pool I've ever been in." Ciaran tells me after surfacing at my feet. He doesn't see that I'd jumped in shock, thinking of creatures rising from the mineral darkness. He pulls himself out and drips next to me naked.

"How do you know if something in here doesn't have teeth?" I joke as I strip. Joe has swam under the falling water and stood up where the water must be shallow.

"How deep is this?" I ask Ciaran when I'm naked too. So much for civilized incarceration.

"See where Joe is?" he points. I nod.

"Every place else is at least thirty feet deep."

"Thirty feet, how do you know?" I ask amazed. Thirty feet is practically bottomless.

"Because I tried to find the bottom all around and can't." Ciaran laughs, grabbing me by the wrist and yanking me off the ledge into the water.

It's so cold.

He swims away as I surface, every nerve in my body has awakened. I take a deep breath and sink, eyes closed, desiring anonymity. Slowly I let the air out of my lungs to descend faster. I open my eyes to crystal clear water, I can see for yards. Looking down all I see is darkness.

It frightens me enough to start returning to the surface. I break into the air and scream. Joe looks at me from the rock he's on top of again.

"It's deep." he yells knowingly.

"What if something in here bites?" Joe shouts to Ciaran.

"Well, it better have a big mouth!" Ciaran laughs. I really hope not, as I find that I can't swim with my knees together. I go over to the waterfall, into its raining, silver flow. There's a slab of stone submerged right under it, so the water's only a couple of feet deep. I lay down in the deluge with my head just above the surface, resting on a rising piece of the smooth slab underneath me.

The rain falling is very warm, very soothing as it bubbles the water. I am bathed in tears. My face feels caressed. I realize that maybe for a long time I've been wearing a scowl, night and day, day after day, month after month. The falling water is doing something I really need, stripping away layers of dissatisfaction slowly, massaging more than my physical. I don't question something so new, invigorating, and undeniable. My eyes stay closed for a long time, as I absorb. How long have I been living someone else's idea of what my life should be? Someday I'll be potent, we'll be potent, and won't feel so.....hounded. It's so hard to acknowledge to myself, our state of sometimes not very subtle fear.

Improving things goes beyond an individual's ability. It's not my problem, it's our problem. And it will take a mutual, unconditional love to fight such callous conditions. There are lots of questions about what's ahead. What does the future hold? And how often have I almost discovered lasting intimacy? They all seem to run away or turn into monsters. Anyway, someday.

For now I'm as peaceful as a clear blue sky. I just float, heal, and forget—at least to some degree—and hope about aspects I want to be a part of my life.

I can't help but often remember a nightmare I constantly found myself in when a child. For weeks I would dream I was falling off a balcony, night after night. I didn't feel safe when younger. And I still don't. Like so many people I know who also feel always overlooked and undervalued. Communally, we're aware of this constant depreciation, but it doesn't bother us so much. It should scare us, if only we had a standard of comparison. I hope that someday we will.

I also had dreams when younger of flying. To compensate for the sense of falling? But not just a concept of flying, I could have sworn I was actually flying. Is that how bad things are? I could feel my weightlessness. Personally, flight is metaphor for self empowerment. I've always known what was right for me, if even momentarily. I would take a running start down our gray, gravel driveway, holding my arms out. Then I would rise a few feet off the ground and be airborne for only half a minute or so. What I would give to experience such a sensation again. Because I haven't—within the last decade or so—is probably why it's such a precious memory. Now I live a heavy life of balls and chains, of ballasts. I have weighed myself down and been weighed down. I can jump but not linger up there with the goals I reach for. Though right now is as peaceful as a clear blue sky.

Blue. My eyes are blue, and people drive me crazy when they speak of particular aspects of a person as though talking about luggage, as

though talking about something one has. Rather then something one is. I am of the blue, I decide. Floating, buoyant. If the sky can be blue and peaceful, then so can I.

I've been torn apart like a rotten piece of linen, broken up into sets of luggage, too often. But who isn't a survivor? Am I possibly a romantic who doesn't believe in dissections of certain types, and who is looking for something rare that's lost in a world of the synthetic, callous, numb, and inflexibly defining?

But right now I'm as peaceful as a clear blue sky, tired of being pieceful too, of being shredded partially. I'm aware that there is always possibility. Some do argue for predestination. Some believe that they are in limbo: the hopeless, the weak, the irresponsible. For if they are in hell they are prisoners. There is no freedom or accountability, there are no demands or possibilities. Yet they've decided that. They have put themselves in their own hell and make a hell of life for others. There comes a time when one must realize that freedom is one's inherent condition, freedom to fight the restraints imposed upon others and the restraints we impose on ourselves.

"What happens if something falls on your head?" someone shouts to me. I open my eyes after sitting up in dancing, silver water. Ciaran and Joe are laying on the island of dark rock across from the waterfall. It's sort of flat on top, which is where Joe's lying, on his stomach. Ciaran has found a perch below Joe, on a similar sized shelf.

"What?" I hoarsely respond over a symphony of raindrops. Joe looks momentarily content, chin resting on his folded arms. He smiles. The

sun weakly shines upon them.

"I said, what if something lands on you from up there?" Joe repeats, pointing far above. I shrug because it doesn't bother me. The heavier stuff would land closer to the cliff face, and I'm not that close. But now I'm insecure, so I stand up. My body is covered from the neck down with greeny-brown silt that's gritty and slimy at the same time. I look at Joe, who's laughing like crazy. The falling water doesn't move anything off my skin. With sand that I'm standing partially in, I scrub myself clean. I feel as though I've scrubbed a layer of skin off, a dead layer, a facade, that I have molted. I then swim over to the rock and climb up next to Ciaran, who's still laying on his back.

Into his ear I whisper, "You've got a dragonfly on your buzzard."

Like a streak of lightening, Ciaran disappears into the water and I have
a place to lay.

"What the hell'd you say to him?" Joe asks. I sigh and raise my arms in mock confusion.

"I just told him there's a red snake up there with you, by your leg."

I lie again, pointing to Joe's feet, so I can lay. Joe jumps into the water too, and I have a better place to sprawl out upon, where the sun shines more directly. I settle down on my stomach, fearing dragonflies, and watch Ciaran and Joe play some kind of "Let's see who gets sucked out of the canyon first!" game. They're daring each other to swim closer and closer to where the water leaves the arroyo, a hole where the two cliff walls meet partially on the opposite side of the falling water.

At water level there's a gap the water rushes into, through which a small part of the continuing creek can be seen flowing, much like the gully created by the sheer walls before the falls. But there are dark shadows along the cliff walls beyond the rough white-water that rushes from that hole. Realizing the danger of being stonewashed, perhaps for miles, they start a competition to determine who can dive down the farthest by submerging together, face to face. It's a tie again, they both seem to be able to jeopardize themselves equally.

"I'm starving!" I yell to Ciaran or Joe, who'll ever respond. As if reminded to do something vitally important, like breath, both Ciaran and Joe whip their heads around in my direction. Without a word both splash towards their clothes to return to the camp to figure out how to rescue our food from out scheming neighbors, and thereby satisfy neglected appetites. I decide to remain, too many cooks and all, so I shut my eyes and go to sleep in the early autumn, faded sun.

Part Four

In the hazy darkness I stumble back to camp bleary eyed, my jeans contorted around my legs like someone has tried to wring me dry, shirt in hand soaked from using it as a towel, and goose bumps all over my body. I slept all afternoon and into early evening after Ciaran and Joe left. Awakened by the cold twilight creeping over the land, somehow I swam across the water which was warm and very dark, and somehow I climbed the shelves of black stone up the cliff face. I can sleep like the dead sometimes, the kind of sleep where nothing is apparently dreamed, which is often fortuitous.

"I think we should go get him." a voice laughs from around the corner of the bending creek. Quietly I walk along the gravel, holding my arms close to myself and sniffling softly. As I turn out of the gully, there's an orange light in the distance, a light that licks, jumps, and dances. It speaks in cracks and pops. I start running towards warmth. The flowing water is louder than any noise I'm making. It's a good, large enough fire, set in a stone circle away from the tent, nearer the water. I stop running and walk up, warming myself. Both Ciaran and Joe have their backs to me, looking with the flashlight into the woods some distance away.

"See, those are eyes." Joe whispers to Ciaran as he scans the forest perimeter. I don't see anything.

"It's probably that lynch mob of raccoons and possums that where trying to get to our stuff." Ciaran tells Joe earnestly, uneasy now that Joe is trying to convince him that something not there is there.

"See, there it goes again." Joe points with the light and his right hand, "It's about ten feet tall and its eyes are about ten inches apart." I softly pick up a small rock from those around the fire and throw it into the woods. Ciaran jumps up from his kneeling position, but I watch Joe particularly. He steps back, wondering if maybe there really is something there. I growl deeply. Together, Joe and Ciaran turn around slowly, distracted and worried.

"WHAAAAAA!!!!!" I yell just as they see me, spreading out my arms and lunging forward right up to the fire that separates us.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGHHHHHHHH!!!!" Joe screams. Ciaran just drops silently to the ground, grabbing his chest.

"OH MY GOD!" Joe yells at me in relief. Ciaran sits up, pale.

"I think I just had a heart attack." he informs, looking really, really shocked. I'm hardly listening I'm laughing so hard on all fours, gripping the gravel in handfuls and beating my fists into the ground.

"I'm gonna pee my pants." I wheeze, looking at Ciaran, who is just staring at me without expression, which is even funnier. I pee my pants, which doesn't feel good at all.

"I've peed my pants." I pant between fits. After a few more minutes, I calm down to just sighing and laughing sporadically. Eventually I stop because my sides hurt so much. I look at Joe, who is obviously disgusted with me since he's poking the fire violently with a branch, but who I can tell also wants to laugh but is too disgusted at the moment. His face contorts from a frown to a grin repeatedly.

Ciaran stands up and leers at me for a moment, then cracks a huge

grin because even he has to admit that I got him good. Or maybe he's thinking about the ax, as he goes towards the tent. Joe is staring at the orange and yellow flames. I sit back and look up at the sky, which is immense, truly a crystal clear night.

"There are so many stars in the sky." I note absently, "Apart and alone." I've never liked to think of the individuality of stars, the loneliness, the reflection.

"There are double stars." Joe answers optimistically. Yes, there are, but are they trapped together or together by choice. Perhaps they're content, which would be sad. Happiness is another thing entirely, a freedom to grow.

"What did you guys eat?" I ask. There's an aching in my stomach because I haven't eaten all day, but it still feels good to clean myself out by fasting. Little, red embers from Joe's disturbance of the fire rise up and disappear into the night.

"The beans, we had the beans."

"Just the beans?" I laugh. Mental note: keep the windows of the truck open tomorrow!

"And the corn."

"Beans and corn, not bad." I note, "I'm starving." Taking the flashlight, I go to the backpacks which are hanging behind the tent. Three or four little critters scramble into the driftwood entanglement beyond.

"You bastards!" I threaten, holding up my fist like an angry old

man trying to cross the street as a motorcycle gang almost runs him over, "And don't come back. If you do, take the biggest pack."

"Hey!" Ciaran answers from the tent. I look in the small rear screen window with the flashlight. Ciaran's in his sleeping bag, arms covering his face.

"All I gotta say is that you gotta get up pretty early in the morning to catch those varmints looking in your bedroom window." I tell him.

"Yeah...right...whatever." he answers groggily. I return to the fire to find Joe sleeping away.

I eat a breakfast, lunch, and dinner of dehydrated oatmeal, dehydrated pancakes, and dehydrated orange juice. I think water or something is supposed to be added to each but I eat them dry, sipping bottled water after each sandy mouthful and hoping that what I've eaten doesn't expand in my stomach causing me to explode. A fine astronaut I'd be.

I think of how funny it is that it was supposed to rain this weekend. Now that I'm fed, I take the clothes and towel I removed from my pack with the food and go down to the creek to bathe. I only peed my pants very little, but any is enough to make me feel like a slob. I return to the fire a new man.

It has started to get a little windy, which gives the trees nearby voices, low, whispering voices that compete with the steady chuckling of the creek and cracklings of the fire.

I hunch down into myself thinking of a time when I wasn't alone, the kind of loneliness beyond male companionship, though there's a kind of loneliness if that's lacking as well.

The fire reminds me of a kind of warmth I feel inside when with her, and there have been so many hers, but that's a different story. Sometimes love is defined as when one has no one else in mind. And when one's alone one has everyone in mind.

I listen to my slow, deep breathing and stare at the flames before me until my eyes start to water. I must make amends with the one I hold precious.

Laying back, I stretch my limbs in the gravel as though making a snow angel, and watch to see any shooting stars above. I shut my eyes for a moment and wish anyway. I want to be given a chance.

When I look up at the sky again, the stars are gone.

"Something tells me we ain't in Kansas no more, Toto." I say to a sleeping Joe. Clouds have formed overhead and the wind is picking up. Dark leaves blow from the forest like letters of warning.

Joe wakes up and looks around cautiously.

"Wow." he comments on the change in weather.

"Wow's right." I answer, "Tell me it's not going to rain Joe. Say it ain't so."

"It's not." he assures, getting up, stretching. Everything is getting louder. The tree's whispering is rising to an incessant bantering, the fire's crackling is becoming a nonstop tirade fed by the wind, and the creek begun to hysterically babble. The first raindrop falls on my face like a dislocated tear.

I look at Joe, who concedes.

"We're out of here." I regret. He's already walking to wake Ciaran.

I sit and appreciate my surroundings and the sounds which give everything emotional character.

"What the hell is this shit?" Ciaran grins as he walks to the fire and looks around, "I want my money back." I laugh too, because there's nothing else to do and because he looks like he \hbar % been sleeping upside down.

"Your hair looks like a porcupine." I tell him with all due respect, which of course means I'm being honest, which of course means I'm laughing in his face. I'd want the same respect, naturally.

"I want it this way." he explains, "Well, so much for leaving tomorrow. I should have hoped for rain." He flattens his hair with his hands and fingers, the raindrops may help but it's too late to jinx.

After taking the tent apart, storing it, storing the sleeping bags, and putting everything into or on our backpacks, we take a break by the dying fire. Raindrops which land on its embers hiss. A crack of lightening echoes across the forest. It's a call to action.

"I think we should get going!" Ciaran sings out. Another boom echoes across the dark, starless sky. The wind is becoming colder, damper, slightly mean.

Smothering the fire with gravel, we head towards the woods behind our campsite. I look back just before entering the forest. The other side of the creek is like an unexplored country and the creek itself has become a line within me. Someday I want to see what it's like on the other side, right now it seems anything could be there. The other side of the line within me, the parts of myself I do not know, may also

be as fertile and undiscovered.

The future will tell.

Upon entering the forest, the wind becomes just a breeze and the rain an occasional drop. I'm starting to like the darkness, its smothering comfort, its intimacy, its familiarity. Of course we're going to get lost.

Joe stops cautiously, Ciaran bumps into him, and I bump into Ciaran. He's shining the light at two green dots just ahead.

"What is it?" I whisper. The eyes suddenly disappear, there's a cracking sound, then they appear closer. Ciaran positions the ax on his shoulder so he can swing at it or something.

"BOB, YOU STILL GOT THAT SHOTGUN ON YOU?" Joe yells out like some cowboy in some western played by an actor who's English and can't help but sound cliche. The eyes disappear, which means whatever it is makes a mobile cracking sound, or has something to do with cracking sounds, or cracks.

It's all so mysterious and confusing.

Then I see it, its thick muscled body, sharp teeth, and short tail.

"What the hell is that thing?" Joe whispers back to me.

"Oh my God, it's a..." I pause for effect, "Deer." Everyone sighs, relieved. The tawny _____doe doesn't move. Joe picks up a branch and throws it near the animal. It disappears into the darkness.

"Why'd you do that?" Ciaran asks Joe, upset, "I could have taken care of it." Ciaran looks at the axhead and at me. I should have buried it when I had the chance.

"Did you see the teeth on that thing?" Joe asks us.

"It's a vegetarian." I laugh. Killer deer? That's a new one. We trample on, humping our way up a gradual, long incline that slowly chops my legs out from underneath me. Like commandos except we're not commandos, we're crawling on our hands and knees as we reach the top.

"Could you smile when inside..." I rasp, breaking off breathless.

"You just wanna..." Ciaran adds faintly.

"Cry?" Joe concludes as though answering a question.

"How long was that?" I ask Ciaran from the bottom of my lungs, who drops to the ground as he reaches Joe and myself. Joe shines the light into our eyes, then at the surrounding trees.

"About a mile." Joe either guesses or believes. I believe. Lightening continually flashes somewhere far off, then after a pause remembers its voice, a voice which is getting louder, more booming.

"I feel like I'm in the eye of the storm." I whisper as we listen to the thunder, the reckless wind and the light dropping of raindrops. We lay restoring our resolve.

"Where the hell are we?" Joe finally admits. Ciaran shrugs. I fumble with the leaves of the forest floor, which smell damp, like just turned earth. No one wants to get up. I wonder if the storm now is a part of what I had brought with me and released? There are always storms within me that I mustn't ever again allow to grow to such extreme proportions.

"It's going to catch us." Ciaran states, inevitably.

"No it's not. Not if we don't want it to." I almost demand, standing up, "Let's go before we regret a decision to remain indecisive." Continuing through the now level forest, we come to the beginning of an uncut hay field.

"This is crazy." Joe yells above the wind, "We'll get struck by lightening." As if to punctuate, a fracture of lightening booms overhead. The rain picks up speed and gains weight, becoming blinding and punishing.

"There!" Joe points diagonally across the beaten-down field. I cannot see to what he's indicating.

"Let's do it!" Ciaran cries out, taking the light from Joe's hands and forging into the field. It's crazy all right, but I follow Joe following Ciaran because I'm the shortest. I've often heard lightening strikes the tallest thing around, but I hope none of us finds out.

We have to practically wade through the heavy, thick, resistive vegetation that once could have been called hay had it been harvested on time. The rain falls in cupfuls. I have never imagined moving so fast with so much weight on my back, burdened down by drenched clothes with shoulders cringing, expecting one of Zeus's spears between my shoulder blades. Ciaran stops at a dark wall. To the side he pushes a very large door, and we step inside for sanctuary. Joe slides the door shut behind us and we're not directly exposed to the elements.

"What the hell is this?" Ciaran defensively demands.

"It's a barn, stupid." Joe answers in that serene, Zen way he seems to acquire now and then, that "whatever" perspective. I follow Joe's

disinterest as he shines the flashlight he has grabbed from Ciaran around the place.

"Jeez this is huge." Ciaran gasps. The ceiling is at least thirty feet high with unmilled, pole pine rafters. The rest of the barn is filled with hay, scores of small cylindrical bales six or so feet in diameter. A cat cries out from somewhere beyond the first row of golden hay bundles. There's a fluttering noise above.

"There are bats up THERE!" Ciaran hollers, crouching down.

"Barn swallows." I correct.

"Bullshit." Joe recorrects.

"Do you know how many mice must be in here?" Joe asks me. I don't want to guess.

"Probably not that many, there's a cat in here." I answer as confident as I can.

"That was probably a twenty pound mouse." Ciaran coughs, "The air smells awful in here." It smells of hay and horses, really damp and warm.

"There's probably a dead cow under all that hay." I joke, "But I'm going to sleep here anyway."

"Oh, so am I." Joe affirms.

"Me too." Ciaran vows.

"When all else fails, lower you standards." I quote. Joe and Ciaran have no idea who said it originally, or at least somewhat originally. A friend from Ethiopia.

"Why don't we set the tent up inside here?" Joe suggests with a stroke of genius. So we set up the tent, which is dry because it was covered

by a waterproof bag, on some hay because the ground inside the barn is bare, compact, cold earth. Luckily our sleeping bags are also fairly dry. In socks and underwear, the three of us zipper ourselves into our respective cocoons. Ciaran checks several times that the flaps and zippers of the tent's door are closed before turning off the light, which is losing its intensity and yellowing from so much use.

After half an hour of total darkness, Ciaran cries out "Damn it I can't sleep! I can feel them watching me, ready to drop straight down on me, right through the tent."

"Who?" Joe asks him, puzzled.

"The bats of course." Ciaran groans.

Despite the roaring storm outside, a restless Ciaran and a very amused Joe--who keeps making weird bomb and bat dropping noises to annoy him--I fall asleep.

Part Five

The sun rises an autumn yellow, a jasmine flower spreading its radiant pedals, seemingly knowing each day leads to its lessening. And that each day eventually brings it back again to its apex. I'm amongst the rafters of the barn, looking out an opening used once for some sort of hay-bale pulley system. The particular rafter I'm straddling is almost directly above the orange tent that contains a sleeping Joe and Ciaran. The inside of the barn is dark, the air speaks of abundant harvests and earthen solace.

There are bats up here, hanging above me, upside down, topsy turvy, scores of them looking like black furred mice with brown leather wings. I have watched them enter and exit for a couple hours. I cannot sleep. There's too much going on all around.

A new day has begun. At first I thought it was solely the sun I was wanting for, but now that it has risen, I know I'm also hungering for something else. Ironically, yet appropriately, I've no clue what that could be. The inside of the barn is always to some degree dark, but I must go beyond. I must be moving on. Whatever is coming down the line will have to find me. And in action I may find that I'll find whatever that something is which I anticipate but cannot envision.

The moments here will not last in the present. Nothing lasts, except for fading memories. Which is a paradox. Eventually, even that which is most cherished through remembrance dies with the people such memories

belong to.

The sun brings light. I can see the reds, yellows and oranges of a countryside constantly changing, cyclically renewing itself. Particular seasons don't last either. The hay field spreading itself across my line of sight is golden and priceless. I have escaped a chrysalis of confining pessimism through nature's example. I am the source and destination of such projections and interpretations. And the elusive subject instigating motivation.

Nature reminds one of the beauty in life and the limited duration of it all. Humbling and invigorating. Leaving is going to be hard, I can tell. I want to stay and I want to go. I want the best of both places, of a home for security and a here that's spontaneous. I could wander the landscape forever so long as I feel an umbilicus homeward, not a safety net but a guiding line. I want a place to dwell that is woven into wilderness, that has wilderness not just at the back door, but throughin and throughout. I want a world that is conscious and considerate of nature.

The room within me for growth is immense. I will keep filling myself until I've no more space inside. Which is a thing unlikely to happen. The world should be a better place, can be, sadly isn't. We live in ignorance deliberately, we are whom we are purposely.

An old man once said "If you can say that you know precisely who you are, precisely what your permanent limitations and abilities are, then you haven't looked deep enough." The cerulean infinity above is a reflection of our own boundlessness. The starry night is a place to

look upon in wonderment. We're lost momentarily, splendidly lost.

I've recognized and released that fear of intimacy, that fear of self discovery. I leave here down a road which could lead anywhere, for all I know. I've no idea where I'm going, yet it's my road. Which is beautiful, ironic, and mysterious.

"And the miles continue..." I whisper to myself as golden sunlight illuminates a crisp autumn morning. I am that old man, telling. I now realize. I am the young man, listening. I stretch and take a deep breath, smiling.

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Part One

I'm often too carefully guarded, not one to easily expose my emotion, seldom placing myself in a position which might require that I risk revealing what I'm feeling. Nowadays, I like to pretend that I can go it alone, desiring a meager safety I only see possible in solitude. Is there a woman who isn't dangerous?

So, for what seems like forever and could actually be, I've been avoiding intimate relationships. I see myself as a fortified, immense, cold castle with countless crenelations occupied by eternally alert sentinels. All approaches are watched vigilantly, eyes scanning the horizon in all directions unblinkingly. Every strategic position is manned indefinitely, while the inner gates and outer drawbridges are never left down for more than a moment, only to let the scouts enter and exit to and from the far reaches. The red siege flag snaps in the high wind, fluttering against dark, flurrying, gray skies. The war drums beat rhythmically while the watch fires burn against the darkening arctic surroundings stubbornly.

The defensive force is enormous: legions of infantry and cavalry, of pikemen and bownen, of brigades and brigades of protectors. Their uniforms are layers of black leather and polished steel plate. Their faces are hidden beneath visored, brass helmets, braced against the cold, southern, bitter breeze. Each knight is a part of myself ready to lay down life and limb, because to protect myself I must sacrifice a part

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of myself to implement the plan of defense. Each knight is ready to make the sacrifice: to ward off any upcoming attack by the Amazon forces, any threat to that which lies within these protecting walls, any threat to my heart—not the physical heart—but the heart which is home to my emotion.

I'm located within that edifice, isolated in a cell of the highest, least accessible tower, where there are no windows and I've forgotten where the doors are. Too frequently I see myself as this castle and set myself within this castle. It's a tool I use to structure my defensiveness. It's a tool that may use me as well. See, the problem with defensive postures by definition is immobility. Such defenses require good footing, so my feet must be planted in order to be emotionally unmovable. I'm my own prisoner to safety. I'm my own prisoner in solitude. Safety and solitude seem to be very much related these days. It's obvious to me that I'm actually beyond being carefully guarded, beyond any measurement of extreme caution. I'm now unwilling to hazard my heart on a one to one basis at all. But that's unimportant. So it must be very important.

I enjoy walking long distances at night. My defenses become nearly invisible. I unwind. It's so relaxing to be surrounded by darkness. The problem with walking at night is that almost everything else of everything else is also invisible. Sometimes that can be positive too. But it's therefore a time of vulnerability, of exposure. Which is why I make certain that when walking at night I am alone, to assure that my defortification isn't exploited.

To leap into a relationship without looking is to unlock all insulating obstacles. It's to go walking at night. Since one cannot be defensive towards a someone and still embrace that someone. I do not have such duplicity of emotion to act out such a role. I'm able to not reveal how I feel, many times, but I cannot lie about how I feel, ever. I haven't amputated emotion, that's impossible. I think I've hidden any desire to show and share intimacy, convinced that feeling anything at all is detrimental. Experience has bruised me well. Because bad relationships have left a very unpalatable taste in my mouth, and bad relationships have left contusions. I've learned my lessons by heart. Ha! I won't make the same mistakes again.

So why am I standing at Casey's door at 8 a.m.—so close to someone so potentially dangerous to me because she knows exactly when I'm shoveling a certain kind of abstract shit in her direction—with finger waiting, hovering, hesitant to press the doorbell? Why have I chosen as my best friend a member of the enemy?

I like to pretend that I am safe from anymore heartache. But who is? Still, I won't allow myself to maintain a relationship with someone who likes to pain—to not just superficially scratch—but with someone who relishes cutting down to bone maliciously. All that was acceptable back then when I'd take anything in exchange for companionship. But there a difference between friction and mutilation.

Mowadays, some people are worth waiting for. Even if we don't know who they are, yet. Keeping in mind that there are no guarantees. Because there comes a time. Comes a time when what is going on around one actually

becomes so obvious that one cannot take it anymore. Comes a time when one sees that there are worse things to occur in life than being romantically uninvolved. Comes a time when standards are lowered or altered to save the heart from anymore abuse. So, now I like to believe that I am confident in my confinement, self contained, now needless.

But then why am I standing at Casey's door at 8:10 a.m., not ready to bolt and not ready to ring, gnawing at the edges of my personality? I'm standing at Casey's door because no matter how I try to convince myself, no matter how I try to shrug it off, repress it, bury it and deny it, I do need companionship. I'm feeling claustrophobic, imprisoned, self exiled. Again. I'm covered in shit once more.

I am a social animal. But it's like choosing between either freezing to death slowly or having to run into a blazing inferno to get some warmth. How difficult it is! Many things are operating all at once. It's like having a heater and an air conditioner contained within me. Both battle to impossibly maintain the temperature each desires. Because each has a different thermostat setting.

If woman knew how hard it is then such knowledge might allow her to understand my cautioning, my distancing, instead of her possibly taking it personally, like I suspect. As I so obviously shovel truckloads of shit in her direction. I do not intend to hurt. I'm just vacillating between believing I'm safe as a recluse and the knowledge that woman has part of what I'm missing, not particularly as an individual for identity, but basically as a human being. I'm vacillating between ice and fire, between loneliness and imprisonment. If I go too close, I'll be drawn

in like a frozen comet towards the sun, to be ultimately consumed. If I step too far away, I'll fly off into the void to be lost. A delicate balance it is. I do not want either extreme. There's no need for such extremes.

So why am I standing at Casey's door at 8:20 a.m., realizing I'm not at all sure anymore about what I can and cannot tell knowing all I know and suspect about present interpersonal assumptions, with my finger hovering in mid-air about to maybe press the doorbell? I know the best reason. I'm here because she deserves better from me, much more than I have given. She's my warmth, I can see that now. I can't walk away. I know that now. I must apologize for trying to on Friday. I need the companionship that only she can give me just by being in her presence, even if we have never seen each other as anything more that friends. Maybe precisely because we have never see each other as anything other than friends. I know nothing higher anyway.

Every tree is rainbow camouflaged in late October. Summer has dropped everything and left. The leaves just take a while to consent, clinging while basking in their final weeks of attachment. I walked here along leaf covered, colorful, suburban sidewalks while leaves fell around me in slow motion: voiceless, brave, defiant. I see the message they impart, it is one of never quitting though one might run out of time. They go out in a blaze of brilliance. They are true to themselves to the last.

This is my favorite season, the reds and yellows, oranges and earth tones, the fleshy smell in the air. There's an energy to autumn, a glorious, intactible vibe. Autumn doesn't last long, so I make the

most of it. The colors quickly fade, the sap descended to subterranean depths for protection, having fled the landscape's winter bite. I can appreciate such an action. I sometimes envy being able to so easily escape a coldness which threatens. My coldness must be confronted. It's a part of me now. It's my present condition and the future forecast. I'll make the most of what I've got too.

Lately, I've been imagining myself almost completely covered by leaves. I can almost smell what it would be like. I think I would feel warm. Sometimes I not only wish I were almost completely covered by leaves, sometimes I wish I could look at myself from somewhere far, far away. Then a few, final, bright yellow leaves would fall on my face and I'd be able to walk away from myself. That's me, testing the bounds. Pushing the envelop.

As morbid as it may sound, I have already chosen the circumstances by which I'll leave this world a long, long time from now. But it is not being morbid to realize that one day one will no longer exist as one exists presently. That time will be a time of celebration. Because to die does not mean to disease.

I'll be very old, definitely past a hundred, supple, strong, gnarled, wise. Because all things have above all other desires a desire to live and because all things die, I will know when my time has come. It will be a happy day as I prepare for the journey by accepting the journey, by saying all my goodbyes, knowing I'll have almost completed the cycle to go who knows where.

The season will be late autumn, I'll be laying under a yellow oak tree with leaves falling all around. There will be other yellow leafed trees around too, creating a carpet of yellow. I will allow the yellow leaves to cover me colorfully. When I'm totally covered I will smile even wider, then I will no longer be alive, but I will still exist, somewhere. I'm so weird so often.

Which doesn't quite explain why I'm standing at Casey's door at 8:30 a.m., day dreaming about anything distracting, anything but the task at hand. The house is colonial, white with black shutters, a gray slate roof, two stories, well kept. There's a long, blacktop driveway leading up and a big front lawn which goes right out to the sidewalk. A path of red and gray flagstones winds up through the front yard. The front lawn and driveway are being covered by leaves even now.

So I'm looking around at Casey's house, which really doesn't interest me except for the fact that it has an orange door with semi-exposed white columns to each side. There are no cars in the leaf covered street. Usually the evergreen shrubbery will last through winter. Well, it's a little windy and the sun is there in the sky but not warm. Therefore, I'm dressed for fall: boots, a light, navy blue, wool jacket with gray sleeves, a pair of bluejeans that are four years comfortably old. And obviously, I'm shoveling.

"Well, are you going to ring the doorbell or not?" a little, low voice asks through the polished brass letter slot. It's Digger, or at least I call him Digger. Ever since he was even younger than he is now.

I kneel down on the hemp doormat to look at small, dark eyes peering at me through the opening in the bottom of the orange door that's big enough for a large book to pass through. Perhaps he has been watching me since I got here. I've heard stories of Digger grabbing for the mailman when the mailman's about to insert letters into the slot. Now the mailman's very careful.

"You look funny." he giggles while stuffing banana in his mouth. I can't see his mouth but I know he's always eating banana, and I can hear that banana chewing sound. He burps and I fall to the side, which makes him giggle more. It's definitely banana.

"What have you been eating, bullfrogs?" I joke as I sit back up. He giggles some more. I picture little bits of yellow fruit spewing forth from his mouth to stick to the other side of the orange door. Digger's blonde eyebrows and eyelashes remind me of the feathers of a canary, just finer and not so bright yellow. Digg is my man on the inside, my five year old spy, my fifth column. Never mind that I'm not a siege party requiring inside information. Never mind that he has quite an imagination without me helping. He opens his mouth so I can see his partially chewed banana through the slot.

"Yeah, I have a lot on my mind." I sigh with a smile at him, sitting crossed legged on the doormat. I play with one of my laces.

"She's sleeping." he informs, "She's been sad." Digger is, specifically, my emotional thermometer concerning Casey. Friday was ugly. I was wrong, she was wrong, everything was wrong. I didn't

tell Kay I was going away, that was a mistake as I look back now. She was hoping I could help her with a term paper due Monday and she assumed I would be around while I assumed she didn't need my help.

So we got in the huge, public, gut wrenching catfight. Plus, because neither one of us likes to fight over anything, I left her as she turned quickly and walked away too. I thought I could forget about it. Wrong.

"Where's your mom and dad?" I wonder, since there are no cars in the driveway. The dog sticks its nose at me through the mail slot and then disappears. I hear its claws clicking away on the floor.

"They went to Aunt Eunice's." Digger tells me sourly. Typically both drove.

"Isn't she the lady with all those birds and warts?" I cringe, screwing up my face.

"Yeah, it's neat!" he giggles. Digger always giggles as if someone is tickling him, even when he's not being tickled. I met Eunice once. She's like eighty and the wart on her chin sticks out so far that it moves up and down like a pointing finger when she talks.

"Ut-oh." Digg whispers, then disappears, closing with a clang the brass mail slot. The dog whines behind the door, with claws clicking, probably walking around the house in circles. The mail slot opens again but the eyes are big, so brown that they look like large, black pearls surrounded by only a outline of white. The eyelashes and eyebrows are different than Digger's; feminine, dark auburn.

Blood rushes instantly to my head, I feel my face heat. The eyes look at me for a moment neutrally then squint.

"Hi..." I whisper, a great difference from Friday. She doesn't answer, just looks at me with those eyes that seem to reflect everything. I can't take the direct eye contact. I look down and fumble with my fingers.

"How was camping?" she asks me softly, though her 'c' sounds more like a 'k' so I suspect she's still pissed. I shrug self consciously.

"It was...alright." I'm on a tightrope and a crosswind is beginning to blow. There's a long pause.

"I..." I start but hesitate. I have to say it.

"I'm an idiot." I admit. I really am.

"I know." she answers, "But I'm sometimes selfish."

"Me too." I concede. I sometimes am. The mail slot clangs shut, the lock in the door clicks open, and I hear Casey run upstairs. Opening the door, the chocolate Labrador assaults me with saliva.

"What do you say there big Wolfie?" I ask Max after shutting the door that's not orange on the inside but white, like everything else inside this house. I like calling Max by other names, like Wolfie. It keeps him off balance. Max tilts his brown head and continues drooling. He's a drooler. Some dogs are barkers, some dogs are sleepers, some dogs are man-eaters. Max is a committed drooler and drool communicator. Or in other words, a licker. He probably would drool underwater too.

And suddenly, only as a dog can do, Max's ears prick up, he's hearing

something undetectable to my ears. He takes off towards the living room in a frenzy of claws skidding on hardwood flooring.

"Look out below!" Digger yells down to me as I start towards the stairs. I jump back as something heavy and breakable shatters on the floor, dropped from above. Whatever it was, it's now a hundred murdered clay pieces. Because I know Digg's coming downstairs, I lay down on the hall floor. Soon I hear him descending the stairs which squeak even under his weight. I can't tell what he's doing, I just lay as though unconscious.

It's quiet for a few minutes. Then there's a scream! I quickly open my eyes and sit up. Digger's laying beside me, eyes closed, motionless, and Casey's running downstairs. Digger opens his eyes and looks around. He's just wearing his underwear and now that I think about it, we must both have looked as though we committed to some kind of suicide pact. Before I can get up, Casey jumps on my chest and puts her hands around my neck.

"What are you doing to my brother? You're making him weird!" she yells, relieved we're both alive.

"He...tried...to...kill...me..." I reply, as though I can barely breathe though she's not squeezing my neck that hard at all. As though I'm the character in a mystery with all the answers but I will die with the secrets untold.

"Don't call my brother a killer!" she suddenly commands with a stern expression, dark brown hair coming undone and covering half her face.

I pretend to pass out as though strangled. But she tickles me under the arms until I open my eyes smiling. The dog comes over and pastes me one on the forehead. I frantically wipe the warm, industrial strength saliva off my skin.

"Gross." Kay laughs, then gets off of me, intentionally kneeling on my stomach.

"YOU think it's gross, he probably just licked his crotch." I harshly accuse Max, who whines and scampers off.

"Don't yell at my dog!" Casey warns me, pushing me against the wall with a shove after I get to my feet. She's a role player and often I am not sure if she's serious or pretending. I enjoy the tension of not being able to tell either way frequently.

"Little brother, what did you do?" she asks Digg in a voice so kind I can't help but laugh. Digger's been trying to sidle his way out of the room without being noticed.

"A clay dinosaur." he gladly admits. I guess if you're going to try to kill someone, might as well do it with a clay dinosaur.

Everyone knows that it's fruitless to ask a child so young to clean up a shattered clay dinosaur. They just don't get it. They just get upset. I've learned this from times when Casey tried to do just that. With a sweeping gesture that shoos him out of the room, Casey lets him go wreck havoc somewhere else.

"You're so...maternal." I tease. She doesn't answer as she walks to the kitchen. I follow like a dog worrying her heals, Max behind me worrying mine. She's wearing a gray sweatshirt and a gray pair of sweatshorts.

"You're so...well dressed." I add. She still doesn't respond though she does pick up a broom and dustpan. Everything in the kitchen is white, which is too aseptic for me, too bright. Even the dustpan is white. But she's not going to hit me with it yet.

"Your kitchen it so...post modern hospital." She's still ignoring me. She's so moody sometimes, without cause. Back in the hallway she sweeps up the shattered red clay dinosaur. I hold the dustpan, occasionally looking up at her serious face.

"You're so...queer." I reveal. She stops sweeping and looks down at me with daggers in her dark eyes. Puppy dogs have those kind of eyes, watery, innocent. Of course Casey isn't that innocent.

"YOU'RE so queer!" she accusingly echoes.

"Don't say that word, it hate it."

"You just said it!" she exclaims, finishing sweeping with the white broom with white plastic bristles.

"But I said it by accident." I explain, excusing myself. Whenever Casey exclaims it seems I end up explaining. She doesn't say anything else. In the kitchen, which might be a laboratory it's so sterile looking, we put the dustpan and broom back after I dump the clay fragments—which look like pieces of a broken heart—into the garbage.

"You're so...domestic." I continue to chide as she walks out the kitchen into the hallway.

October 22nd

"Is this a gray thing?" I wonder as she climbs the creaky, wooden stairs. I love her silence, it's so inviting. I follow her up the stairs wondering what it's going to take to get her to talk to me.

"Aren't we in a good mood." I note from the doorway of the bathroom as she brushes her teeth like she's sawing down a tree, "From the Paul Bunyan school of dental hygiene, ladies and gentlemen..." Her dark brown hair hides her eyes, which are avoiding me.

"I guess your mad." I speculate. She vehemently spits into the sink as punctuation.

"Casey, I'm sorry. What do you want from me? I'm not a mind reader." I earnestly grope. I've fallen for the bait again, I know. But I can't so easily help myself. She smiles at me through the mirror, flinging her hair back with a jerk of her head.

"You're so...sensitive." she laughs. It's great when she has the opportunity to totally sink my ship but doesn't. I feared hearing "Crash your ship into that iceberg for me." again. Or "I have placed magnetic mines on your ship darling, now do as I say."

"NO I'M NOT!" I insist.

"Yes you are." she replies, "And why do you care what other people think anyway?"

"I guess I can't help but be who I am. But that's unimportant."

She smirks and looks at me knowingly.

"So it is important." she surmises, knowing me always better than I give her credit.

"So what do you want from me?" I suspiciously ask her.

"Does library ring any bells?" Kay victoriously chortles. As a matter of fact, it doesn't. Pavlov does though. I was cringing at the thought of a public apology. I grab her by the head, put her in a headlock, and mess up her hair. This continues until I think her hair's messed up enough.

"BULLY!" she yells at me after I release her, then looks in the mirror at her reflection. Her hair is all over the place.

"Oh my God!" she cries out, "My poor hair."

"Your hair's so poor..." I begin, but a barrage of excuses for punches from her to my shoulder forces me out of the bathroom. She locks the door.

"You're such a...butch." I tell the heavy, stained oak door.

"I called your house yesterday." she yells over running water, "You, of course, weren't home." Are we back to this old thing again?

"Of course." I answer cautiously, "I got home this morning." She already knows that now anyway.

"Your father answered." she continues. I hate it when she does this, when she points out the painful truth because it bugs her so much. Casey can't stand my parents.

"He sounded very interested, very concerned. Such a nice man, so sincere." she sarcastically sermonizes. I don't need her to point out the obvious.

"I really don't need the obvious to be pointed out." I yell in to her.

"Well, I can't stand people so inconsiderate." she answers angrily,
"It's like you're an orphan but the people who abandoned you just happen
to live in the same house."

"I KNOW all this." I sing out, trying to appease her indignation and bored with a topic which always rubs Kay the wrong way. Why should one care anymore about those who have never cared to care? Some day there'll come a gentle wave to wash us clean, and we will fly above it all. Casey opens the heavy door and pushes me aside. I like to get in her way. Her hair is ponytailed.

"I heard you hair is so poor that you have to use a real pony's tail."

I grin, standing outside her room, which is next to the bathroom, as she looks for something in her closet. She has hundreds of shoes, boots, sandals and all other types of footwear with funny names that she has never worn. They are quickly being thrown out of the closet onto the floor as she rummages, some in boxes, some not.

"Gross!" she answers.

"Preparing for the revolution?" I joke as she emerges empty handed.

"You can come into my room." she insists, "I'm not going to bite you."

"I hope not. I haven't had my shots." I explain, sitting down in an armchair covered with a blue flowered pattern after bumping a huge teddy bear to the floor.

"Don't be mean to..." she warns then stops in mid sentence.

"HA! So you never named it!" I shout triumphantly.

"...to that big teddy bear." she adds, badly, belatedly covering her slip-up while putting all these different colored shoe boxes and loose shoes back into the closet.

"How could you not name it?" I ask, mock hurt.

"Its name is Laertes." she insists. She doesn't want to offend me. After all, I gave the stupid thing to her for her birthday. I don't think she ever liked it. Neither do I. It's too big, it scares me. But I figured why not. How often do I get to give someone a three and a half foot tall teddy bear?

"I thought it was called..." I remember vaguely.

"NO. It was always called Laertes." she insists, closing the closet door. "I'm going to take a shower, you can get something to eat if you want."

I go downstairs to the kitchen, where I find Digger sitting at the table with bowls and bowls and bowls of cereal in front of him.

"What do you say there Big Digger? Is this the place you come to eat breakfast?" I ask with a bad accent from some country that doesn't exist. I sit down next to him and survey all the food before us.

"Hungry?" I ask obliquely, not ready to face the answer, whatever it is, head on.

"No. Listen." he tells me seriously, pointing to all the cereal bowls. The cereal is softly popping, hissing, and crackling.

"WOW." I absently comment, struck mid-thought by a fact that wanders into my mind. I look around at everything in the kitchen, seeing that

yes, everything is bright white. I feel like I'm in the movie 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, after the guy dies and things get so much more bizarre.

"What are you trying to do?" I wonder, opening up the refrigerator.

Digger is pouring more bowls of cereal and milk into white enamel pots
because he has run out of white bowls.

"I'm trying to see how loud they can be." he whispers.

"Who are they?" I cautiously ask, knowing I really don't need to find out. The mind of a five year old can be surprisingly complex. He points to the cereal. I decide I'll have some grilled cheese sandwiches, seeing as how the cereal is possessed. I go overboard, using a half loaf of bread, putting fried onions, tomatoes, and green peppers inside some.

Casey comes downstairs, dressed in tight jeans, a white, men's shirt, and cowboy boots.

"Giddy up!" I drawl. We sit down amongst bowls of whispering cereal and eat up grill cheese sandwiches and 'them' with some strange red fruit juice.

"Why are your parents obsessed with things white?" I ask as we eat on a white table from white cereal bowls drinking from white glasses in a room where everything is white.

"My parents aren't possessed!" she defensively tells me, kicking me under the table.

"I said obsessed, not possessed." I laugh.

"Oh, it's all this noise." she laughs too, looking around at the bowls and pots on the table. "My parent's aren't obsessed, they're just

clean freaks."

"Oh. Freaks." I echo nodding, expressing my understanding. Digger has his ear to one of the cereal bowls.

"See," she points, "You're making him weird like you."

"I'm not the one whose kitchen looks like a laboratory. And I'm not making him any weirder than he already is." I counter. We're sitting in a greenhouse-like-sunroom part of the kitchen that looks out onto the woods behind the house, a solarium. It's a nice day.

"So Digger, how loud are they?" I inquire, looking at Casey's puzzled expression.

"Not very loud, they're very small."

"Don't call him that, it's not his name. And who are they?" she commands me and asks Digger. Digger points to the cereal bowls.

"Wonderful, just wonderful." Kay exasperatedly sighs.

"Who's going to watch him while we're at the library?" I remember to ask.

"You are." she smiles.

"How are we going to get there?" I smile back, crookedly.

"You mean to say you didn't drive?" she frowns.

"No." I grin triumphantly.

"So, we'll take the car that's in the garage." she straightforwardly replies, as though I should know these things, then lightly taps me on the cheek with her palm as though to wake me up.

"No. I'm not driving that car. You're not driving that car." I

tell her, trying to sound as though I actually think she'll listen.

"Why?" she shrugs.

"Because it's too valuable?" I try to reason. It's a 1969 Ford something or other that her uncle stores in the garage and drives on weekends or whatever.

"You've never even seen it!" she excitedly remembers, getting the keys from the dining room desk.

"I guess you're driving." I surrender. I'm not about to fight with her again, I figure once a year is enough for me. We go outside after filling the dishwasher with emptied out pots and bowls and the dog with as much cereal as he can stomach. Digger's dressed in what he calls a disguise. In other words, he's wearing clothes: a red, hooded sweatshirt and red sweatpants.

"How's it going champ, you gonna win your next fight?" I ask him as Casey opens the garage with the little remote control and gives me a glance that could mean don't encourage him or prepare to die because she'll be driving. Inside there is a car covered by a khaki car cover. We roll the cover off and I gasp at the unveiled vehicle.

"HOLY SHIT!" I stare bewildered, "THIS is your uncle's car?" It's a 1969 Ford all right. A 1969 Mustang Fastback etc.

"Occoo, he said a bad word!" Digger sings out. The garage is small, the car barely fits in it.

"Yes he did, didn't he." Kay agrees, winking at me. I'm starting to become more than just edgy.

"You're going to drive this. You." I observe, as I try to get a handle on things. I walk around the car feeling its flawless, black painted, sleek, cold body, and inspect its thick tires that are on chrome racing rims. Casey gets into the driver's seat and turns the ignition key. It turns over immediately, softly purring like a tiger, a tiger two or three tons with a V-8. The garage shakes.

"So much for the atmosphere." I nervously joke as I strap Digg into the back seat and then sit myself into the passenger seat. Committing myself to a ride that's probably going to kill us all, I shut the door and put on my seat belt, becoming part of the car's plush, red interior. I cross myself, and I'm not devout or religious for that matter. Casey jabs me.

"I do have a license." she assures. I should have brought my crash helmet. Her license is a license to risk my life, that has been used before. Slowly she puts the car in drive and gives it some gas. We roll out of the garage. I shut the garage door with the remote and we roll down the driveway. Everything looks O.K. Maybe I've over reacted.

She does have a license, and I have driven with her before, and sometimes she didn't even hit anything.

"Look, that's Billy's mom." Digger points out. A bundled up lady walks with her rusty little dog across the driveway entrance. She's always wearing these bright, neon colors. Today it's a pink that looks sickening. Casey waves to her but she doesn't wave back.

"Bitch." Kay squints at her. Sometimes she scares me. With no cars

on the leaf covered street and Billy's mom nearby, whoever Billy is, I think maybe the dog is Billy, Casey signals right. Then floors the accelerator. The tires scream as though tonmented, spinning wildly as the engine roars and we shoot out the driveway. I think we're going to land in the neighbor-across-the-street's front yard. The car turns in a wide fishtail, back shooting out, wheels still spinning. Kay straightens out the car and the tires catch, rocketing us down the wide, empty, colorful street whilst leaves parachute to the ground.

Through the side mirror I see that Billy's mom has the rusty dog in her arms and both are covered with the leaves kicked out in the roostertail of red, yellow, and orange that the spinning tires created. Eyes wide, I gape at Casey for what she just did. She's looking back through the rear view mirror, smiling at Billy's mom, who looks like a clown has just thrown up on her.

"I think Billy's mom's yelling at us." Digger exclaims. I yank him back into his seat. Knuckles white, I brace myself on the dashboard as we travel across town breaking all land speed records.

(This is a dead page.)

Part Two

We pull up to the library unscathed. I haven't said a thing. I'm in shock. How could someone so sweet and feminine be such a lunatic? It takes all kinds. We get out Casey is full of energy right now.

I look at her wondering. She's definitely a psycho killer.

"Don't expect me to ride home with you. I'm not ready to die today."

I inform matter-of-factly.

"Chicken." she grins at me. But I'm not joking.

"YOU'RE DAMN RIGHT. Even Death would be afraid to ride with you. You went through three red lights, two stop signs, and made some guy pull his poor dog by the leash from the ground into his arms because YOU DIDN'T SEE THEM CROSSING THE STREET! Who do you think you are, Steve McQueen in Bullit?"

"I SAW THEM!" she shouts, "Why are you yelling so loud?"

"BECAUSE YOU'RE INSANE!" I scream with restraint, "You drive like someone with a death wish!"

"I saw that man with his dog." she retorts.

"That's even worse." I counter, because it is, We're not trying for bonus points, driving is serious business. I can't tell her all this though because I'm not about to fight.

"Stop yelling, I have to get some books, and people have to be quiet in the library." she simply states. End of conversation.

I look at Digger, who is enjoying the whole show, and at Casey as

she enters the library

"I can't wait till I can drive." he tells me enthusiastically.

"Your sister wasn't driving." I correct, "Driving means you're in control. She's not in control."

"I can't wait to drive home. Maybe we'll get in a car chase." he hopes.

"I could wait forever." I sigh, trying to unwind. "Let's go inside and find Kay." I know already that it's a round trip ticket I have purchased, I don't have the patience or desire to walk home.

"Can we play hide and seek again?" Digg wonders.

"Sure." I answer, "But no more hiding under people's tables, especially girls and women."

"Is that because of the lady in the dress the last time?" he remembers.

"Yeah." I smirk. So he lifted her dress up, big deal. He's only five. But boy did she jump out of her seat screaming something about a pervert in the library.

I go through the revolving doors thinking of how strange a weekend it has been, how odd that I'm thankfully back where I started from with Casey before the weekend began, again friends, and how strange it is that somehow I'm more aware of myself than ever. Hopeful it's going to be a good week, if I can just make it home alive.

It's ironic how I went away to get away from myself and actually got closer to myself. And I let go of Kay entirely only to find that she's necessary to me, even if she drives like a blind man. Or woman

in her case. I'm definitely going to have to teach her to drive same. But there is hope. After all, she has only had her full license three weeks, though she has already had numerous accidents.

Maybe we'll get kicked out of the library like last time. The guard recognizes us and nods stoically, maybe he cracks a smile almost imperceptibly.

I know that sometimes there are no alternatives. Like trains sometimes there are few tracks to choose from. Luckily those times are rare. Excuses are bought and sold wholesale everyday in most people's lives. There can always be found convincing arguments to exempt ourselves from our own common sense. I'll have to think about whether or not we lay down the tracks to our futures ultimately.

Often there are choices, possibilities. Occasionally there seemingly are none, and even rarer are the times when there actually are none.

Sometimes there's a gun to your head and a bullet in the chamber.

Conscience may not be the first voice listened to, therefore leading to decisions that are made by deliberate inaction or deliberate false action. One can easily convince oneself with rationalizations.

So maybe I don't do what I believe I'll do all the time.

Yes, I'm back in the death mobile with the death seeking driver.

I'm trying to think about safer places I've been: roller coasters, surgeries, cave-ins.

"You didn't have to embarrass me like that!" Casey suddenly yells out over the blasting radio. Maybe she's mad. I turn the radio down.

"How would you have liked to have been embarrassed?" I ask her,

receiving a jab in the ribs consequently.

"Hands on the wheel!" Digger shouts out from the back. I turn around to look at him, giving him a thumbs up and wink. He returns a thumbs up and wink likewise.

"I think we're being followed!" I notice excited, looking past him at the cars behind us. Digg turns around, excited too.

"We are!" he believes, then sits back down and seriously looks at me, "We're in a car chase."

I glance at Kay guiltily, she's frowning.

"Don't encourage him." she whispers to me in warning, "After today you should know better."

Now I'm frowning. Sure, why not just dump on me, it's dump on Bob day. It's be mean to Bob day. Let's blame Bob for the problems of the world.

So what if I lost Digg in the library for a few hours.

How was I to know he would hide on a shelf and fall sound asleep?

So what if for a moment we thought he had been kidnaped, maybe, by some of the pirates playing in Peter Pan in the children's theater on the first floor!

"But we could be in the paper tomorrow." I inform, looking on the brighter side. Any little event is reported in this town, especially when a police search party is involved.

She's silent, and turns up the radio, end of conversation. I'm always uneasy when she's so quite, when her dark eyes seem to stare ahead for miles at something only she can see. I can only guess.

Zigzagging through light traffic for no apparent reason other than excitement, we pull up at a red light that Casey actually acknowledges. I say we because I like to pretend that I have some measure of control and that I am actually involved in the vehicular decision making process.

I really don't and I really am not.

We're at Echo Avenue and Huguenot Street. The Steve McQueen Mustang's engine beats almost as fast as someone's excited pulses, mine. Leaves blow across the streets everywhere like small, colorful tumble weeds squashed paper thin to fly in an autumn, dustless dust storm.

It has been getting dark earlier lately.

An old gray lady pulls up next to us in a big, boatlike, gas guzzeling, beige car from the 1970's. She looks like a dull, black and white movie character placed on color film, placed into a Technicolor movie.

she's on my side. I casually look at her: bifocals, flowery, faded hat and all. She looks at me and I smile with as much teeth as I can show. It doesn't phase her one bit. Maybe she bends over to the passenger seat in her car and pets her dull gray cat from the same forgotten black and white movie that they have been transposed from.

I see her as the kind of old lady who doesn't give children back their balls when their balls accidentally land in her yard. She has a room filled with tennis balls, soccer balls, base balls, basket balls, and kick balls, all unreturned.

I then see her as a kind, dignified, now solitary grandmother who is enjoying her later years and past memories to the fullest. She has a yellow pet canary named Laertes.

I don't believe it for one moment, she's a spherical kleptomaniac.

I smile at her as obnoxiously as I can but she is a focused iceberg.
Or far-sighted.

Casey looks at me and laughs.

"You're such a ham. Who's that, your girlfriend?" she quips.

"Yep." I answer just as blunt, "And I love her, we're going to get married."

Casey puts the Mustang in neutral and revs it repeatedly. The faded octogenarian next to us, my future bride coincidentally, looks ahead at the red light hanging in the middle of the intersection which sways back and forth like a clock's pendulum in the leafy wind. I slink down into the red interior, this is Casey's idea of revenge for this morning's library fiasco.

With me just barely able to see the colorless old lady from some melodramatic black and white movie no one remembers, the light turns green. Kay drops the console mounted gear shift lying between the seats into low. The car rockets forward, tires chirping over the pavement, creating a small cloud of blue-black smoke.

The engine eagerly roars, eating up air and expelling noxious ozone depleting, greenhouse effect producing gases. The engine eagerly roars as though wanting to redline and blow itself to bits but never is able to do so because the oil pressure within it never gets high enough since people won't drive it fast enough.

"Why do people demolish nice old ladies off the line at traffic lights?" I wonder aloud rhetorically, stating it more so that asking a question.

Luckily there are other cars on the road for Casey to tailgate and to slow us down. The engine is disappointed, there's so much more ozone to tear apart and heat to trap if people would only feed it more fuel.

At the next light, Huguenot and North Avenues, the same beige car with the same old lady pulls up next to me. I say me because I'm the one being purposely embarrassed.

"We're in a car chase!" Digger blurts out, barely able to contain himself. I slide down in my seat again. This is very humiliating.

The colorless lady from a colorless movie probably made just after the silent movie era looks from the red traffic light to me and back again. She's determined, feisty. I hide as best I can even though she is probably sitting on a few yellow phone books just so she can see over her car's black dashboard and beige hood.

The light turns green and the death seeking driver takes off again. The engine has great expectations. I sit up expecting the beige tank of a car with fins to be behind us, but she is actually in front. Kay's laughing. I look at her, confused.

"YOU let her win!" I state, shocked. What's the world coming to!

"Of course, I'm not THAT bad." she smiles devilishly. Are we developing a sense of honor?

"That was very noble." I tell her, "I might have creamed her. In fact, I would have creamed her."

I'm being facetious, naturally.

"But I'm a NICE person." she teases, implying among other things

that I'm not.

"Oh, that's not what I've heard." I taunt. I haven't heard a thing.
"Really?" she hopes.

"No." I laugh. She gets me one good in the shoulder, good for a sissy like her anyway. I'd tell her so but she might beat the butter out of me.

Why I never let her miss I don't know, perhaps I'm hoping she'll sock it to me hard enough for me to deck her cold. I don't know.

"If you jumped out of a PLANE without a parachute you couldn't hit the GROUND hard." I needle, poking at her.

"Your jokes are so corny." she smirks back.

"Well, there's no accounting for taste." I have to admit.

"No there just isn't." she counters, flippantly.

I shut up, I know when to quit. She drives with a look of satisfaction which I'd like to remove with some sandpaper or with anything even more abrasive.

Reversing the black monster from Detroit into its lair, I cross myself thankfully, and I'm still not religious.

"I think we lost them." Digger sighs, relieved, looking up the empty, leafy street as we walk to the house.

"Probably not for long." I warn from behind. Casey pushes me forward.

"STOP! You're going to make him paramoid." she claims, pushing me forward again.

"You're not paranoid if someone's really chasing you." I grin, taking a few quick steps to distance myself from her.

"You're paranoid." she maintains. Before we go inside I conspicuously look up and down the street several times then shut the door. I know Kay's watching me.

"Stop it already." she laughs.

"I can't, I'm paranoid." I remind her seriously, locking the door and turning quickly to inspect the closet, and drawers of the little, oak, roll top desk in the hall.

"No, they are not in here." I sigh, relieved.

"Except in the cereal boxes." Digger adds.

"Right." I'm reminded, "But they are small. Do they grow?"

"No, they're small." he assures. Casey throws her hands up in defeat and goes into the kitchen to listen to any messages on the answering machine probably. I hang everone's coats on the hooks inside the hall closet. There are boxes of shoes in there which also are Kay's. This is the only house I know of where the dog doesn't care who comes and goes at all. Wolfie walks through the hall dejected, into the kitchen and lays down somewhere with a grunt.

"What do you say there Timbuk?" I call to him.

"His name is Max." Digger yells down to me as he goes upstairs, already beginning to shed his red sweatsuit and sneakers as he climbs. I go to the kitchen. Casey has disappeared, she has that tendency. So I go outside, through the bright kitchen, squinting, and flop down in a red, maple leaf covered lounge chair that's on the open, back porch. I close my eyes for a while.

Even on Sunday I can hear a leaf blower in the distance, worn by some person who can barely speak English and who's getting paid probably even less that the amount of English he knows. Colonialism incarnate, except we bring the one who are to be subjugated to the mother country nowadays.

Squirrels play on the crispy, crinkly, old and new, leaf blanket that's on the ground. Someone rakes dried, rustly leaves in a nearby yard to either the right or the left of Casey's house, I can't tell.

Individual leaves jump off trees screaming in temporary solitude silently, to land with the most delicate, almost imperceptible thudd. What goes up must come down. What grows up must die down. Am I'm losing my mind gradually if nothing seems to startle me anymore? Am I losing a mind centered view in favor of embodiment? In favor of a disemboundment, a positive imagination insanity, in favor of creativity.

"Lookout below!" a little voice from above yells down to me. I know it's not a leaf, I've heard this voice before. By conditioned reflex I roll off the lounge chair and roll under the lounge chair just as a heavy bang shakes the small, red maple leaf covered porch. Then there's another and another impact.

The lounge chair breaks the fall of a forth object, but by giving way and with me underneath, I'm almost squashed before the springs and straps under the object's mass rebound.

I'm then hit several times by the rebounding mass above me.

"CASEY!" I yell desperately. She's probably blah-blah-blahing on the phone with someone blah-blah-blahing back. I know, we do it often.

"CASEY!" I repeat at my loudest.

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"What?" she screams from inside, alarmed, and comes running through the kitchen looking around.

"I'm under here. Don't come out. Your brother's trying to kill me again." I inform, warn, and speculate.

"My brother's not a killer." she defensively answers, about to walk out onto the porch. The heaviest object of all lands right between where I am and where Casey's standing, which is in the porch-to-kitchen sliding glass doorway.

She jumps back hands to her chest.

"What was that?" she exclaims while looking at the shattered, red, clay pieces scattered across the leaves covering the porch.

"Well it sure wasn't birdshit!" I yell to her hoarsely as she turns to run upstairs.

Another object falls onto the lounge chair and hits me mildly in the head through the mattress several times.

Casey comes running back.

"I can't get in, he locked the door." she cries out, "You're bleeding!"

"I KNOW THAT!" I growl as though patronized, "Just tell me when I can get out of here."

She steps out onto the porch, staying close to the wall, and tries to peer over the eaves of the roof at the two dormer windows of the room Digger is in.

"Now." she waves. I roll out from under the lounge chair and jump towards the kitchen. Something shatters next to me and I slide on the

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red clay fragments into the kitchen, tripping over the door saddle. Like a head first sliding ballplayer, I sprawl on my stomach across the white kitchen floor.

"Now."

"Now."

"Now."

"She said now." I repeat sarcastically, wiping the blood from my eyes. I roll over on my back and the chocolate dog licks me right across the forehead, right across my bloody cut.

"You're bleeding." she repeats hysterically. Never mind that she almost got me smashed by a falling allosaurus.

"I know that." I grumble angrily, getting up and washing my now rabies infected, cut forehead in the white sink which I stain with my blood, as if the modern world isn't blood soaked enough already.

I wash my wound with cold water and soap. Casey comes over shaking and looks at the cut above my right eye. She starts to spontaneously sob.

"It's not that bad." I try to assure her, but she starts into tears like the faucet.

I pat her back with her leaning against my shoulder like I would burp a baby. I've, of course, never burped a baby, but none the less.

"My brother IS a killer." she cries.

"You're brother's not a killer, no one's dead." I soothe.

"Yet." she sniffles as she looks at me, face red and puffy, "And now you're going to get sleepy and go to sleep with a concussion and go

into a coma."

"No I won't." I promise, getting her a tissue.

"No?" she snorts into the napkin.

"Never." I swear. I'm starting to feel dizzy, like I'm going to fall asleep and go into a coma. But it will pass.

Upstairs, outside Digger's room, we knock on the solid oak door repeatedly. He doesn't answer, which isn't good. For a minute I wonder if he could be one of those piles of shattered red clay on the porch downstairs.

"Open the door you little shit!" Casey yells inside, tense.

"Get back from the door Digg, I'm going to kick it in." I warn, looking at Kay eagerly, "I've always wanted to do this."

With a running start I slam against the heavy door. It doesn't budge.

I crumble to the floor.

"Bad idea." I pant, having knocked the wind out of myself very thoroughly.

"Wait!" Casey exclaims, as though I'm in the middle of something.

"I'm not going anywhere." I assure on my knees, breathless.

"The door is locked with a skeleton key. They all have the same lock." she informs me as she goes to her room and takes out the brass key in that lock.

"It's good you remembered this before someone got hurt." I tell her dryly. It fits Digger's door and knocks the key already in the lock on the other side to the floor with a clang.

Inside, he is sleeping, practically naked on the floor below the window.

All the red clay dinosaurs which used to sit on the window sills are gone. I shake him awake.

"Great, not only is he a homicidal killer, he's also a narcoleptic." Casey muses.

"At least he's not an agoraphobic, narcoleptic, homicidal killer. If he were, he wouldn't be able to go outdoors to the homicidal killer's hangout, the fast food restaurant. And he wouldn't be able to unload all the ammo in his automatic weapons because he'd continuously doze off." I ramble. No, I'm only slightly concussioned, the rest is that imagination insanity growing.

As soon as Digg's eyes open he says "I didn't do it. It wasn't me, I don't know who did it."

"When mom and dad get home you're going to be bar-b-qued." Casey informs him. I look at him sternly which must be a hilarious expression.

"O.K., so I dropped one of them." he admits, "But I don't know who dropped the rest."

"And then after they bar-b-que you they're going to microwave you until you're gray and gooey." Casey continues.

"I thought we were buddies." I remind him, shaking my head back and forth confused, "Does Minute Mouse try to kill Courageous Cat?"

"Who's that?" he wonders.

"And then they're going to broil you in the oven until you're only a shriveled up mass of charred flesh." Kay adds, locking the windows emphatically as though a warden sealing the cell of the convicted.

"Alright I did it, but I had a good reason." the prisoner confesses,
"The dinosaurs we're coming alive and were going to eat the world until
nothing was left." he tells me with a very honest face.

I believe him. It all makes sense to me now. I look at Casey, convinced.

"Oh give me a break!" she explodes at me, "Are you gonna believe that?"

"No, I don't believe a word. He's a criminal, just look at him."

I tell her, winking at Digger.

"And they're going to make you eat Brussel sprouts forever." she tells him, "And antipasto salad."

I look at her with an eyebrow raised.

"Well, someone has got to put fear into him." she explains, "Or else he's never going to learn that what he's done is wrong."

"Are you feeling alright?" I have to wonder, "Or are you feeling a little, queer?"

"I hate that word!" she grimaces, trying to cover her ears.

"Fear is just going to make him worse." I try to delicately tell her. She just looks at me as though I'm the biggest idiot in the world.

"Oh really, and what do you want me to do, take him out for ice cream?" she huffs.

"No, but if anyone's going to make him paranoid it's you." I tell her, wincing.

"Are you saying I don't love my little brother?" she accuses. I can't tell if she's being genuine.

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I've really put my foot in it. Digger forgotten, she stamps to her room and slams the door. Is she pretending?

I take the key out of Digger's door, who's already asleep on the floor and probably is narcoleptic, and I lock her in her room. She's pulling my leg, maybe.

But I'm a nice guy, after a few minutes of silence I unlock the door.

"Well, I think I'm outta here." I call to her as Digger walks by and goes downstairs practically naked, as if nothing extraordinary has happened all day.

The door opens and she smiles silently. She's very, very...unique. That's a word with many connotations, appropriately. How am I supposed know if I'm crazy if everyone around me is nuts too?

"Jeez, it was just a joke. You're so sensitive." she tells me apologetically.

"From when?" I wonder. I can never tell, I'm a sucker.

"From Brussel sprouts." she reveals sheepishly.

"I'm going anyway. I have to get some things done." I tell her honestly.

"Oh." she frowns, "Call me."

"I will." I promise, kissing her on the cheek, "Now if I could just remember where I live, because I'm so sleepy..."

"Don't joke about that!" she grins.

"And what my name is..." I add, opening the front door after getting my jacket, "And who you are..."

"I could give you a ride home." she offers from the top of the stairs.

I shake my head no.

"Oh no you won't!" I declare without doubt. I smile to her and she smiles back, then I shut the door behind me and rush for fear of projectiles into the leaf covered, red, orange, yellow and brown suburban world where even when awake everyone seems as leep. Everyone but me and a couple of my closest friends usually. She's precious all right. I'm not sure what kind of relationship we have It's too open to categorize. I wish we were much closer, she and I, me and me, and all those different parts of ourselves. I am too carefully guarded, fragmented like those dropped dinosaurs. There is so much I want to share with her.

I walk alone down an empty street of wind blown, fallen, dead but colorfully detached foliage with dark, arboreal skeletons leaning over me under a gray, clear sky wishing I could just fly away anywhere, absolutely anywhere.

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Part One

There's no denying that this class sucks. I'd rather be unconscious than in this overwhelming state of ennui. Ennui, a word Jacques Cousteau might use. For example: "I was filled with a tremendous ennui waiting for Jean-Micheal to untangle the octopus from around me." Maybe.

Mr. Weston's booming monotone has lulled everyone in the entire world into a state of half consciousness. Those in the majority, already half conscious before entering this dull domain, risk becoming practically brain dead. I am trapped in a room of mediocrity. They take notes, but it's blind consumption of unchallenged information, a successful self destructive, a chosen brainwashing, an acceptance and communication of ideas which one hasn't inspected closely or at all. SHEEP!

To my right, in the next column of desks, directly across from me, is a guy so far gone that he's slowly swaying back and forth, eyes closed, body still trying to fight an enveloping need to sleep but not yet aware of its own defeat. Everyone was defeated from critically thinking upon entering this room. A line of drool hangs from his chin, swaying like thick, clear syrup in an opposite direction to the side to side movement of his torso. He goes to the left while the drool goes to the right, it grows as he goes to the right and the drool goes to the left. I watch helplessly as Josh goes through the final throws of Weston acoustical hypnotism.

I'm waiting for the pendulum of drool to reach his blue and white, horizontally striped, rugby style shirt. Then he'll not only have just

drooled, he'll have just drooled on himself.

It's drama like this which keeps me awake. There won't be any school tomorrow, by the way. There can't be, it's snowing. And that means we must be silly for the rest of the day.

Josh the Drooler loses his final fight and lapses into a temporary coma, falling like a tree, bumping his head on the spiral notebook atop his tan desktop. Out cold. I watch as a puddle of saliva forms on the white, lined, half filled, exposed page of his notebook, getting Charlemagne all wet. I wonder what it would be like to write on unlined paper. It's not allowed, there's too much implied, too much latitude. Even lined paper that's blank isn't really blank, even when we're supposed to think originally we're limited by those damn lines.

The puddle of drool begins marching down the edge of Josh's notebook and across his tan desktop. Some ink has been picked up, Charlemagne is alive again. I hope he has enough saliva to reach the floor, then he'll not only have just drooled on his desk, Josh will have just drooled on the classroom. I'd wake Josh up before it's too late, but I fear he'd jump up too quickly and I'd be drenched by a whipping line of slobber.

You can stare at Weston like a zombie, face and mind blank, he doesn't mind that. But never fall asleep or talk to anyone while he's extolling us on the virtues of someone or someplace in history. But the fact that there's historical data on anything doesn't mean that whatever is being discussed actually occurred, I demand.

I like to toy with Weston, who religiously believes in the accuracy

of anything labeled historical. Sure, I don't listen to what he says. It goes right through my head, to my pen and onto paper, like with everyone else. Except I know when I'm doing it. Everyone else in the room seems to have no concept at all of what's going on. The fact that this class is required is obvious, otherwise I wouldn't be here. I'd be spending my time wisely.

My notes are riddled with question marks and "maybe"s as well as frequent "nobody knows for sure"s.

"What do you mean MAYBE?????" Weston once detonated while standing right over me, causing the air in my lungs to reverberate. He was checking the class's notebooks to make sure we were writing our notes in outline form and on lined paper. His history is carved in granite. So I pretend to listen, nodding my head once and a while when his tone of voice changes, which impresses him. Or I'll raise an eyebrow at the appropriate time, which inspires him.

I had a teacher in an earlier grade whose name was Westo. Coincidence? I kept think of the word Presto and expecting a magic trick or something just as extraordinary.

No, there won't be any school tomorrow, with half a foot of snow on the ground since midnight and no hint of it letting up. My heart almost skips a beat. We'll be trapped!

"JOSHUA!" Weston thunders in mid-sentence. Half the class of the half that came to school today jumps in their seats in startlement. My heart does skip a beat, which is something that I hope doesn't

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become a habit. Weston continues without hesitation, in his same, uniform cadence.

His large, rotund, gray suit covered body must be some kind of resonating chamber. He only wears blue ties too. I wonder about the significance.

"JOSHUA!" he repeats, face, head, and scalp getting red. The other half of the half of the class that came to school today jumps in bewilderment. My heart skips another beat. This class adds that certain kind of spice to my life that I can't get anywhere else. Yeah, sure it does. The spice known as dust.

They're all sheep being led to slaughter. It's sad. I have no pity either. It's both sad and pitiful. It's also neither because we all get what we ask for eventually.

In an amazing demonstration of delayed reflex, Josh jumps up dazed and looks around confused, almost falling out of his desk. I get the impression he expected to wake up in his bed, from his expression of utter confusion. Josh is a nice guy and all, but he's too average, too groggy, too snoozy. He reminds me of the sheepdog who falls asleep and ends up in some wolf's stomach along with the sheep he'd been watching, only because he seems too confident in the righteousness of his own comfort, and unaware of potential problems like detention.

Do I envy such recklessness? No, I think it's stupid, it's for all the wrong reasons. But he's making a statement, he's exercising his right to voice his opinion in any way he wants. And he's definitely going to fall asleep again.

"My name's Josh." he mumbles, shaking his head slowly as though dizzy, while wiping the side of his mouth with his blue and white shirt sleeve.

Weston starts in on it again, exactly where he left off. Sometimes I think he's going to run out of air before he finishes his sentence. Then I envision him inhaling hugely and depressurizing the room, popping everyone's ears. By now, though, I believe his stores of monotony to be inexhaustible. As one lung is emptying the other is being filled, then they switch, so he never needs to pause.

I watch as Josh's eyes slowly become heavy again. He's defenseless, the wolf is calling at his door. The wolf is always at the door, except he's at Josh's door hungry and knocking.

I hate the people in this room particularly, and everyone else in the class though they're not here as well. They're so shallow, unaware, blindfolded, unperturbed, cast.

SHEEP!

I pity their uninspected, blindly following, self denied, boring, blueprinted, petroleum product/internal combustion engine using, pollution based lives they will lead without doubt. They need a wake up call but they live "do not disturb" lives.

My exceptions to this malice are Becca, the perpetual almost red haired tease who almost commits herself to "I'll think about it" s; Spiro, the class clown dethroned, and Juan, the guy that never speaks and when he does nobody understands a word at all.

And none of them are here!

Becca's probably sick or doing something with some of her nauseating

north end friends. What's the difference in those two possibilities?

Not much. I feel about as sick around her friends as I would if I had tetanus or germs entrenched. Except her friends are germs with conceited attitudes entrenched. Spiro, I know, is doing something only Spiro could think of. Perhaps he's sleigh riding and is planning to break his leg by crashing into a tree again, like in eighth grade. The possibilities are infinite.

Juan probably got deported.

And I'm here because I had an exam earlier, because I had to see my guidance counselor who probably couldn't guide a kazoo up his ass and should, and because I'd be getting my astronomy paper back. I got a well deserved fifty on it from a teacher who thinks he's a secret agent. He has so many gadgets supposedly, but is still just a fishmonger.

And I'm here because what else is there to do?

In this class I feel like a piece of furniture becoming dusty quickly, and I feel like I'm surrounded by furry, warm, invisible cotton that's trying to smother me by filling up and drying out my mouth, nose, and lungs. Weston's voice is actually a subliminal lullaby. He's a blackbearded, almost bald egghead; rotund, well dressed, arrogant, "well read"; a soapbox academic dictator whose sole purpose is to lead our brain cells into a bottomless pit of zealous acceptance. After school detention is when he removes all personal conviction forever. I do not know what he specifically does, but I have observed the unfortunate effects on the once expressed curiosity of two victims last term. He performed an imagination ectomy that left those two individuals in a state

of utter devotion to the belief that the world is fair and whoever doesn't agree is lazy and should leave the country.

I'm not about to fall over face first like Josh, who is now about to do an encore imminently. I will not succumb to Weston's grasp. I also fear detention because Josh would be there to drool all over me like I visualize him slobbering all over everything.

I have imagination, I can stay awake by playing mind games with Weston and mind game solitaire against myself, which I guess isn't really solitaire then.

I'm better able to endure because I know there'll be no school tomorrow. My greatest satisfaction wouldn't come from the fact that I'll have no school, though that's going to be great. What I really revel in is the notion that Weston's lesson plan will be screwed up. I imagine, I nod interested, and I endure.

I picture Weston naked behind his desk, naked walking down the hall, naked driving home to the library which he lives in under "B" for boring, and naked running down the street past a church on a Sunday only wearing jogging sneakers just as mass is letting out.

I smile. Weston assumes I'm enjoying his verbal bludgeoning.

Spiro was placed way up front in the first seat of this row, my row, and that's right next to Weston's desk, two whole seats up from my own. We had too much fun together back here. Spiro is the funniest person I know. With a teacher who pronounces the word gymnast as "GymNAST," Larchmont as "LarchMOUNT," and Mamaroneck as "Mam-a-ro-neck," who wouldn't?

So Spiro was moved forward with the accompanied decibel increase

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from proximity to our glorious leader, and Becca was moved from that first seat to Spiro's, right in front of me.

Juan sits behind me and is usually silent except during a test, when he needs answers. That leaves Becca to talk to, my captive audience. I can talk to her softly about absolutely nothing and she has to listen. If she turns around, Weston will get her. I risk causing her to be detained for the sake of amusement. Works for me.

Sometimes the funniest things pop into my mind and I've got to tell someone.

Weston can't hear me because I speak low, in whispers. Anyway, his voice drowns out all other competing sound because it's so thick. Becca must listen to me, nodding silently even though she might not have heard what I said. I know she likes it because she sits way back in her seat so I can talk to the back of her orange-yellow, medium length, wavy haired head.

I guess it's weird and it seems to only be me, but I know I hear this almost imperceptible echo after each word that comes from Weston's voice. The effect is hard to pick up because his words are usually connected. It's an almost religious experience. If he were a bee he'd be kicked out of the hive for buzzing too often. Maybe it's only my imagination or the ringing of my ears from exposure to such a powerful sonic source.

Any same teacher would let us go before we're snowed in and have to spend the rest of our lives here. Maybe that's what he wants. I have to admit that Weston would be a great bedtime story teller in such a situation. He should sell recordings of himself about the Holy Roman Empire, the Hapsburgs, and other uninteresting but tranquilizing subjects.

According to his history, which is a history of exclusion, only white males have done anything remarkable, fellow white males like Hitler, Stalin, and Hoover to name just a few.

Weston would make millions, driving sleeping pill companies out of business with a non-toxic, biodegradable, (he will rot when they bury him if the morticians don't use formaldehyde), non-polluting (relatively, excluding sound pollution) sleep aide product.

What's the worst someone could do, overdose on Weston and fall asleep for a couple of days? Of course there would have to be warnings on the product not to operate heavy machinery while listening, or else all over the industrialized, decaying world people would be falling asleep in their armored cars, ammunition factories, bombers, and supermarkets.

And there would have to be a disclaimer that the manufacturer is not responsible for any loss of creativity or concern in the consumer regarding the surrounding world.

If these deleterious consequences occurred, which they will of course, and there was n't such a disclaimer, Weston's financial empire would crumble and he'd lose all his profits. Look around, it's obvious that it's not the quality of one's behavior that is regarded as most important, just grab what you can before getting caught, and when you do get caught, lie.

Anyway, how am I going to get home in this blizzard? They'll have to blast us out of here, if they ever find us. Yes, I believe Weston wants to do just that, he wants us stuck, he wants to be the focus in a time of crisis, he wants to be a hero.

I can see him now, the man in charge of the students trapped in the highschool, rationing food, fixing tourniquets, supporting collapsing structures, amputating extremities without anesthesia, contacting the appropriate authorities by standing on the snow burdened roof communicating in semaphore, cooking the first student to die so the famished other students can live and so they won't eat him, building fires with books from every subject but history, secretly sabotaging every attempt to escape before placing himself somewhere in the annals of survival history, hoping to be in the same section as a tragic, cannibalistic, Himalayan plane crash.

The heavy, burlap colored and textured, dusty, ceiling to floor drapes hide the outside world. Of all my classes, this one is the only room that has carpeting and those damn, dusty, medieval drapes. The reason: both the reddish-brown carpeting and the coca brown drapes absorb sound. The appropriate administrators must realize that without such acoustic dampening the building would vibrate and nearby seismic laboratories containing Richter scaled instruments would be registering false tectonic vibrations due to Weston's voice.

Behind the drapes are windows that look out onto a small, empty, triangular courtyard at ground level. Nothing grows in that patch of dirt outside, it is barren, now covered by a blanket of countless but unique snowflakes.

Maybe the snow piling up out there is getting deeper because the

snow building up on the surrounding roof is sliding off, and the courtyard has three stories of snow filling it! Suddenly all that weight pressing down and pressing against the windows of this room will be too much. Our windows behind the drapes will break first, due to years of pane loosening vibration.

Then a wave, cold and white, will sweep everyone out the door violently, still in our anatomically incorrect, rear end numbing, one piece, chrome tubing and indestructible plastic desks. Weston will stop the whole school from filling. He'll block the door, luckily having taken a deep breath the moment before disaster and be at his widest.

I've got to get out of here!

Or maybe the dusty, dingy burlap drapes are actually the curtain of a stage. But what side is the audience on? My suspicious tendencies presume that we could be the show. The drapes are a one way observation curtain much like one way glass. We're on the opaque side. Someone is watching.

What if they catch every little snide remark, every little spoken thought, every breath and blink? But then Weston would be on stage too, so that can't be. He wouldn't play the part well.

Maybe he's not in on it! What if behind the curtain, watching, are thirty other Westons-to-be, in training, secretly learning Eurocentric monotony? Weston is unaware of his legendary greatness, unaware of his much sought after technique to lull and dull.

Nah. I just have to get out of this jail! I'm going off the deep

end.

Josh's head bangs down on his desk again, right into his previous puddle. No one seems to notice, particularly Josh, who's beginning to softly snore. The whole class is comprised of the walking dead. They'll always be zombies it sadly seems.

Weston perks up, realizing he now has a prisoner to torture after class. I'm still taking copious notes, but writing them from left to right. What's sad is that I've become used to reading my notes that way. Maybe I'm teaching myself dyslexia.

There has been an electricity in the air all day, ever since everyone woke up to graying skies, falling snow, and cinnamon raisin waffles. Things have sounded more pronounced, things have looked more impressive, more memorable, more apparent. The subtle smells everywhere are no longer so easily overlooked. My sense of where I end and the world begins, as well as other perceptions, is crisper.

Adrenalin has been readily flowing all day. Well, at least until I came in here. Adrenalin had been readily flowing all day until I came in here, wherein adrenalin levels reduced significantly. Now adrenalin is building up in reserve. But levels are still above average.

Weston finishes just as the eighth period, final bell rings. I hate those bells and the fact that he milks the clock for all it has got. Does Pavlov ring a bell? Does creativity vampire ring a bell?

I pack up my books in my gray knapsack to leave Mr. Weston's resonating presence. My ears are slightly ringing. The worst fate I can think of to wish upon anyone is the hallucination of voices that

aren't there, the hallucination of one voice particularly, Weston's.

"BUBBY." he booms to me as I leave. He respects me because I've had him for two years. This year I chose him, that's how bad the alternatives were. It was either Weston or the lying idiot who thinks he's an ex-fighter pilot, veteran, daredevil, movie star.

Pick the best of the very odd, very mediocre, very simpleminded.

"Bye. Have a nice weekend." I tell Weston, smiling slightly. I'm terrible, it's only Thursday.

I walk away from his dusty presence and his dusty, balding, blackbearded, middle aged domain. His world is stagnant, dry, scratchy, sleep inducing, thought repressing, dead. In comparison, the hall I walk into is a field of moist, sweet, ruby red roses.

I have to get a grip on things now. I take a deep breath, outside.

I'm always the first outside and it all comes back to me, the sharpness,
the adrenalin, the edge that today defines perfectly.

After a few more deep breaths I'm alive and pulsating with possibilities. I might even call any girl I want to and take her out square dancing. Woah! Square dancing? Maybe I'm still a little zonked.

I think Weston's room is full of carbon dioxide. Maybe he's actually a plant keeping the hidden windows closed so he can feed on our breaths, and the curtains are drawn or else the sunlight will turn him green.

Yep, I'm still zonked. I lean against the wall as I return to my senses. There's no one in the hall, there's no sound as the fifteen or so male, female, and androgynous geeks whom I was imprisoned with leave,

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each on their own tunnel-vision doomed course.

ZOMBIE SHEEP!

With the souless bodies gone, I'm alone in the hall next to Weston's door leaning against he light blue wall. To the left and right are other classroom doors framed by blue, closed, interspersed along the two sides of the hall with dark brown lockers between. The ceiling is low down here, the round lights are recessed in, of course, recessions above me. At the end of the hall, to my left, is the smokestack, a black, cylindrical bulletin board which runs from floor to ceiling and is about ten feet in diameter. It's ugly, strange, and in the way. It rises through every floor. Other corridors branch off the intersections it creates.

To the right, at the other end of the hall, are heavy wooden doors, closed at the moment. They're varnished wood and lead to the main stairway.

"Joshua, welcomé to detention." I hear as Weston's door slowly closes,
"I hope I have upset your shed-u-al."

"My name's Josh, man." I think I hear in response as the door shuts tightly. Sucks to be Josh.

My locker is right across from Weston's door. After several unfocused attempts I get the combination right. I'm free, school's over, it's snowing, three day weekend. Adrenalin is in full gear, oxygen is adequate at the moment, someday I'll get out of this place. Too bad no one is taught anything worthwhile, this is just a storage area for the old men in charge. We're raw material for their wars to keep them rich, bodies to fill up space in their companies doing meaningless jobs to keep them rich,

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candidates to put in jail if they upset profit margins, to keep them rich.

Combination locks are so mysterious, I ponder thoughtfully. The circular is turned into the vertical numerically.

There's the real world and there's highschool, never the twain shall meet. Both are bastions of indifference. Highschool's indifferent to your identity, the world is indifferent to your existence. And the cause of indifference is people, undeniably, for to be indifferent one also must have the potential to care.

I suddenly realize that I don't know the number to my locker! Oh no! I never look at the little, riveted, stainless steel tag with black numbering at eye level attached to the bottom, long, narrow door of my locker.

449 I now notice.

Imagine the consequences if my locker didn't have a number! Nothing works if it isn't numbered. Numbers make the world and the modern age work. Without numbers we couldn't count the casualties, the victims of indifference, or the blood saturated harvests of materialism.

I won't remember 449 for more than an hour.

I know my locker from all other lockers on this wall of lockers which comprise a subset of all the brown lockers in all the schools on the entire planet because my locker has the name Kurt scratched into its dark brown paint.

KURT!

Too bad Lee's gone, he's the originator of Kurt.

Everybody has a little Kurt in them, everybody is striving for that perfect condition of Kurtness. The problem is releasing the Kurt within, expressing one's Kurt. I get in touch with my Kurt and consequently I'm no longer spaced out from that last class.

So I open my locker praying nothing falls out onto my feet. The balance is precarious. There's a vertical column of junk inside, of books, papers, forgotten clothes, vermin for sport, fruit and fruit flies for that sweet aroma, and other deeper, concealed secrets.

This is the amount of room that has been allotted. Even if it was empty I still wouldn't be able to fit in there. I have not been given enough room in this world. I have not been given enough, enough has not been provided.

And my locker says Kurt despite the fact that Lee moved back to Florida. I finagle my jacket out somehow and open the top door of my locker with the release inside the coat compartment.

"A-YEAH A-BAAB!" someone yells down the empty corridor from somewhere beyond the smokestack. I know who it is. I look to my right to make sure Jeff isn't around, or Juan.

"A-YEAH A-JUAAAAN!" I call back to that person. There's really no telling what either Jeff or Juan would do if they heard. They might never talk to us again. Of course, since both and particularly Juan never talk, and when Juan does no one understands him, it might not make that much of a difference.

The person shouting is Greg, coming from the art classes wing of the school, a part of the school I hardly know. I'm overburdened with academic courses.

Greg looks so much like me that people often ask if we're brothers.

I say he looks like me because I was here first, born eight months before him. Sometimes we even get away with the brother routine, until one of us screws it up purposely.

Walking fast, which means he's walking like a goose in a hurry, feet seemingly only in front of him, he marches down the hall with his thick, beige drawing folder clamped to his side while the other arm swings mechanically.

Why do people walk like a robot?

"I hear you gotta get up pretty early in the morning to catch Mr. Weston looking in your bedroom window." he tells me while opening up his locker speedily.

His locker's right next to mine, 440 something. I haven't looked up yet because I'm concentrating on stuffing all my books I'm planning to forget about into the small, square compartment of my locker.

"I'm telling him." I warn, glancing at Greg and at Weston's door. He smiles.

"Oh, that's right, he's your boiy." he reminds himself. If someone is really with you then he's your "boiy." It's better than boy, it's better than friend, it's better than ally. Where he got that one I've no clue.

"He ain't MY boy." I insist. I can't say "boiy" because it's Greg's word. Since he introduced it, he's got exclusive rights, a copyright type thing.

I shut the top part of his locker. He opens it and shuts the top part of mine, which has Kurt etched on it. The paint underneath is orange, so the letters are orange. I open the top part of my locker and shut his. We continue this routine like some old comedy act. We're unwinding.

A hall door at the end of the corridor opens with a grunt.

"How the hell are we going to get outta here?" Jeff wonders. Jeff is definitely our boiy. We stop the locker war, I turn to Jeff, who's standing down by the end of the corridor.

"What did you say blackman?" I ask in a German accent. It's from a World War Two movie we all watched one boring Saturday night. See, as best friends we can insult each other as much as we want. We all get our fair share.

"Shut up you two twin-albino, white, sissy pieces of pallid shit." he answers, taking his headphones off. He knew what I said even though he couldn't hear exactly what I'd said. It's our custom to greet each other with insults.

"Now does he mean that one albino shit us out? Or that two albinos shit us out?" Greg wonders absurdly. Jeff's smiling like a buffoon intentionally.

"Both." he answers, kicking his locker before even attempting the lock. Usually he starts kicking all the nearby lockers after he fails to open his locker. I don't think I've ever seen him open it yet. So he continues kicking it.

Some people are weird, like Jeff. Greg knows it, everyone who eats with us knows it, I know it. Wait. Then again, Juan eats lunch with

us, George too, and some big guy named Carmine who everyone thought was named Mitch and who no one really saw until someone realized he'd been sitting right there with us for half the year. He quickly disappeared after that.

So everyone who eats lunch at our table is weird. Greg's weird, I'm weird. Actually anyone who is interesting at all is a little weird.

"Easy there Helmet." Greg whispers to me low enough so Jeff can't hear what he'd said. HELMET!

I bend over, laughing hysterically. I start pounding the lockers with my fists riotously, compounding the racket Jeff's making. Helmet that is.

See, Jeff's hair is cut really short, which is cool, short hair is cool. But he has sideburns at exactly the same length as his hair, so he looks like he's wearing a Roman helmet made of hair!

It's hilarious!

We're not cruel, we'd never tell him and hurt his feelings, which means we're hypocrites. I feel guilty but I still can't help it, I can't help laughing, we're terrible. HELMET! This one of our boiys!

Only Greg and I share the joke, it's too potent to distribute. Which one of us originated it I forget. It's become collective. It's terrible, it's hilarious, it's cruel, it wouldn't be so funny if it didn't make me feel so guilty.

Plain cruelty is not funny at all. Ragging on friends and feeling slightly guilty without hurting feelings are what friends are for. Like there's the milk incident wherein I nailed Paul with a pint of one percent

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and Paul just stood across the table from me face dripping, amazed, while I got hauled away to the authorities. That still cracks everyone up and I'll never live it down.

I compose myself, Jeff's coming.

He walks down the hall pissed that his locker is still a secret contraption he can't figure out. What he needs is a good bolt cutter.

"I got a bag of food in there that's been in there for two months." he growls, as though if he could get to it he'd eat it. He looks inside my locker before I close it, as if curious about something he hasn't seen before or at least for a while. I lock it up and just as I do everything inside shifts. I know that the next time I open it I'm in trouble.

Greg's locker is immaculate. That's because it's empty except for his drawing book and a few textbooks in the top. He closes it self consciously, turning around to Jeff and myself, who've been watching.

"WHAT?" he demands. I know what Jeff's going to say.

"You got a lot of room in there." Jeff notices, "How would you like to rent out part of your locker?" He'll definitely say no. I would. Jeff as a locker mate is like asking for fungus to grow inside your locker because that's exactly what will happen. The fact that I have fungus in my locker is irrelevant.

"I don't think so." Greg so easily dismisses the whole idea, "All you need is a bolt cutter. I'll bring one in tomorrow."

"Monday." I correct.

Winterized, the three of us walk down the corridor, through the heavy doors, and up the wide, empty stairs to catch the bus home. I notice

that we are so different externally, which is odd. We're not a clique, we're just three separate guys who hang out together. I can't help but notice these things today.

I'm wearing a white and black ski jacket, bluejeans, and tan construction boots. Greg's got this long, dark gray, tweed overcoat that comes down to his knees, darker bluejeans, and white, beat up, hightop sneakers. Jeff's wearing his white-leather sleeved, purple bodied, J.V. football jacket, black pants, black socks, and black sneakers.

Oh, and Jeff is a blackman and we are whitemen, but that's insignificant. Or, in our own language, Jeff is "The Blackman" and we are "albino pieces of shit." All is fair in friendship.

I look blue collar, Greg looks like a college student, and Jeff looks like a non-oriental ninja offensive tackle. Strength through diversity.

Greg never ever brings books home, which is annoying. I'm busting my balls in physics and he's drawing crosshatchings. I can't draw crosshatchings and he knows no physics, so we're even. Jeff lives out of his black leather knapsack now that his locker is inaccessable. I'm shirking, I left everything in my locker intentionally because I know there'll be no school tomorrow, which will be a get up late Friday. Homework be damned.

"Where is everyone?" Jeff wonders as we pass two young ladies that the three of us don't know who are walking down the wide stairs as we ascend.

"Looks like someone hit her in the face with a bag of nickels." Greg comments when they're out of earshot, almost. "With a bag of

nickels," one of our most favorite though senseless expressions.

"I feel like Charlton Heston in The Omega Man." I announce expectantly, alluding to a very obscure reference.

"Hey you hoser!" Greg shouts in response. Jeff is confused. Jeff is confused more now than Jeff normally is that is.

"What are you two babbling about?" he wonders absently from in front of us as we ascend another flight of old, worn, off white marble stairs. The center of the stairs is most worn, the middle ground is most used. I walk up the sides purposely, avoiding the beaten path.

"Haven't you ever seen <u>The Omega Man?</u>" I ask him, amazed. I'm really not amazed, I really don't expect anyone besides Greg to have seen something so outlying. Jeff nods negatively.

"Haven't you ever seen <u>Strange Brew</u> with Doug and Bob McKenzie?"

I add even actually less expectant, but trying to sound astounded. He again nods no.

"Well," I begin as though explaining something elementary, "Charlton Heston is the last healthy man left on earth after a germ war and all these mutant albino's are after him."

"See, you are albino pieces of manure." he chortles. Greg tries to trip up Jeff's feet.

"I'm not done!" I continue, pseudo annoyed, "And in the beginning of <u>Strange Brew</u> they refer to <u>The Omega Man</u> during a really bad home movie. They're Canadian and they say 'hey you hoser' all the time." I hope that explains it. Jeff looks back at Greg and myself with a dry smile.

"Why'd I ask?" he wonders, throwing up his hands, "Why does Jeff bother to ask lunatics to explain themselves? Why does Jeff know lunatics? Why do lunatics know Jeff?" He's being rhetorical of course. Still, there are no simple answers as to just why.

At the top of the stairs we look out the five heavy, glass doors which comprise one entrance of many entrances. Outside is a blanket of white which has drifted, windblown, and snow is still falling nonstop. The whole school is empty and I feel like we're the only passengers on a crewless cruiseship. Educationally shanghaied.

"This is odd, usually you gotta squeeze through the halls to get anywhere." Greg notes, pushing open the middle door after flipping up his collar. I zipper my jacket to the top, which covers half my face, up to my nose. A huge gust of wind tries to force itself through the doorway as we force our way outside. With Jeff straggling, the three of us trudge out along a beaten, fading path in the snow. The white particles from the sky fall in large, fluffy, cold, mortal flakes like albino pieces shit.

We cross the bridge, a semicircular, elevated causeway that is a walkway to descending stairs. Under the bridge is the library, which has windows looking towards the school and is covered by earth everywhere else. It's strange. Underneath this causeway leading from the main glass door entrance to the rest of this walkway above the buried library is a glass enclosed corridor which takes one to the subterranean library. Whomever decided to bury the library is creative, to say the least. I bet even a pirate.

We go down the stairs, past the bridge, towards the bus stop, which is a five minute walk through Huguenot Park, with its two frozen lakes that we trudge between. I'm glad I'm wearing boots. We stop at the end of the line, where a road runs from left to right and right to left in two lanes. The road, North Avenue, is impassable. There are no vehicles what so ever on it, not even any parked cars except for the red hotdog truck down a ways and that is always there anyway.

Seemingly dead, leafless, foreboding skeletons that once were trees lean over the road and over us threateningly. Like small figures in one of those winter landscape models, one of those liquid filled, clear, crystal balls which when shaken becomes the scene of a blizzard, we stand perfectly still while snow thickly whirls around us. We stand still, in shock. The umbilical cord between our homes and school has been cut. Greg walks out onto the road, looking up and down while leaning to peer into the distance like a pitcher reading signs from his catcher.

"If only Kurt were here in the Kurt mobile." he regrets upon returning, breaking the frigid silence. Kurt, of course, doesn't exist. And there's no way home. A way home doesn't exist either. There's more than a foot of snow on the long ago plowed roads. Every car has been vaporized by aliens and nobody is driving in this mess.

The dominant theme at the moment is thick, falling, white snow, thick, fallen, white snow, and abandonment. We are adrift on an iceberg, we are in a desert of arctic sand.

Jeff looks like one of those albino mutants from The Omega Man, white

snow capping his head, covering his eyebrows. In fact so does Greg. His flat top cut black hair is also capped with a layer of snow, except his is square. Jeff's accumulated snow is round of course. The funny thing is that no one wants to brush the stuff off their heads. We all just squint in the snowflake riot around us.

In two years things won't be the same.

"This is sort of like the end of <u>The Thing</u>." I recall. Jeff ignores me. He's learning. Greg calmly nods affirmatively. We share the same data bank of obscure references.

No, in two years we could all be scattered like snowflakes as we fall to earth, as we do what we have to do. Constant change is here to stay.

Greg makes a snowball with ungloved hands and holds it up threateningly at me. Me! What have I done?

"If you don't meet my demands I'll start killing the hostages one by one." Greg announces in a very bad accent that's supposed to be from the Middle East but sounds more like one of the Indian guys that work at Pitstop.

"Get him!" I urge Jeff. Greg drops the snowball and starts running down the sidewalk, where ever it is. His direction is toward the pay phone. Jeff starts after him, I follow less enthusiastically. We're running zigzag in the snow. I start walking because I'm not running around like a lunatic.

"Hey Kurt! It's me Kurt!" I yell after Greg, who's disappearing into the white as though being erased from a sheet of paper. "You're not the Kurt." he calls back. Another obscure reference. Jeff is disappearing too. They pass the red hotdog truck and Jeff shortly quits running to walk instead. Greg disappears.

Passing the red hotdog truck, someone says hello to me. I look over amazed, this lunatic is still open. Snow is an invitation for lunacy. The old guy, whom I don't know because I don't eat hotdogs, sits inside listening to some all talk, all news radio station while reading the newspaper. Maybe he lives in there. I try to keep looking strait ahead.

I don't want to know I don't want to know I don't want to know at all about it. With one eyebrow raised in amazement, I just continue walking. Some things make little sense. I catch up with Jeff, the non-oriental ninja offensive tackle in the snow. I tap him on the shoulder.

"What do you say we..." I pause dramatically until he turns around,
"Warm things up a bit around here?" Jeff looks at me with a pensive
expression, as though I'm a stray dog that has been worrying his heels
all day long and he doesn't know what to do with me.

"Don't you watch any movies?" I scold.

"Yes, but I don't MEMORIZE everything." he answers flatly. He's right, I'm a movie addict. Often I go to matinees on the weekends, alone. Nobody knows and I'm not about to tell.

We plow our way to the corner, where another bus stop is, and the pay phone. Greg is at the phone looking frozen solid with the receiver to his ear.

"Great, his mom or Roj is going to give us a ride home." Jeff hopes.

"Wake up Cinderella, El Roj is away at school and his mom either isn't home from work or is too scared drive in this weather." I predict as Greg hangs up.

"WEIL?" Jeff blurts out. I shouldn't intentionally get him so worked up about things. Greg steps back, feigning offense.

"WHO WAS THAT?" Jeff rudely demands. I like watching him get almost exasperated.

"Netania!" Greg answers just as inappropriately energetic.

"What about your mom?" Jeff cringes as his hopes are dashed.

"No one's home. And WHAT about my MOM?" Greg retorts offensively, pushing Jeff pseudo insulted. Usually we're either pseudo this or pseudo that, which makes it difficult to get a true point across. The price of crying wolf often. I step between them before a shoving match becomes a close quarter snowball fight I just know I'm going to get stuck in the middle of.

There's no way anyone at my house can pick us up, and I know everyone's home and the truck can go anywhere. Because every cat kills his own mouse. To even ask seems absurd. And there's no commercial break long enough. Both Greg and I know not to ask Jeff if he can get us a ride from his parents because we hardly know anything about them except that they're very strict.

"I ain't calling my house." Jeff mumbles, "They'll probably tell me to bring home six bags of groceries and a goat, and that it builds character."

So we're just standing around freezing slowly to death in a blizzard and we all have our problems. Not one car has passed yet.

"Yo Greg," I try to lighten things up a bit, speaking of goats."

"Remember that time you slept with the goat."

"No!" he answers, "YOU slept with the goat."

"Really?" I try to remember, "Yeah...I think it was me." The only person who would know for sure is Moozer, he's the one infatuated with goats.

"Damm right it was you. Ask Moo the next time you see him." Greg assures. I've never even seen a live goat, where the goat thing came from is a mystery. Greg looks at me sideways after a long silence. The green traffic light signal box on the telephone pole on the very corner clicks as the lights change. There's about ten feet of visibility. My hands may never again coming out of my pockets.

"What do you say we...warm things up a little around here?" Greg grumbles effectively at the both of us. Jeff's fish eyes are about to pop out of his head. I almost can swear that Jeff's eyes, when looked at from a profile, stick out farther than the bridge of his nose.

"Damn it, you two scare me. HE just said that." he gapes. This is true.

"Really Kurt?" Greg verifies, impressed.

"Really Kurtis." I answer. We punch fists. That we often say such similar things in similar circumstances and have people amazed thinking we planned it though we didn't is nothing shocking. It happens more than

frequently, it's just that seldom is someone present in both instances.

Jeff puts on his headphones, which were hanging around his neck. He's fed up with the two of us. We stand on the corner, a few feet from the bus stop, as if waiting for a bus, as though hopeful, while knowing intuitively that it's never going to come. We're being slowly covered like statues in an Alaskan park.

"Are we waiting for a phone call?" Greg suddenly wonders, reminding me of the time when he busted out with "Who is this guy?" The guy was Mitch who really was Carmine and he disappeared forever afterwards.

"Where's Mitch?" I laugh. Greg widely smiles and shrugs. The two of us step farther away from the pay phone because the three of us actually do look like we're waiting for a phone call. Jeff follows absentmindedly.

The chances of someone calling that pay phone right now, in a blizzard, while we're present, waiting for anything, is colossally impossible.

So sirens in the distance approach for some reason.

"Yo Bob, it's your friend the midget towtruck driver you told me about." Greg warms.

"Don't even say that!" I recoil slightly. Things around here are supposed to make sense. These are the suburbs. Then again, because these are the suburbs, sense has nothing to do with things around here.

A red Ford Bronco 4x4, roostertails of snow projecting rearward from all four tires, zooms toward us from the south, our right, and skids into an arc right before us, blocking the empty road. The tinted window on the passenger side rolls down. I know who it is.

It's John Brettmeister. He's a shorter than me type guy with tired, dark hair that looks dried out and fake. He's one of my boiys.

"Yo Bob!" he yells from within, excited. I have suspicions. I walk through the snow to "his" truck.

"What's up John?" I ask, shaking his hand and looking around at the interior of the truck, which smells very new, "You didn't..."

"Yes I did, you want a ride?" he assures and offers.

"Nay, I'm waiting for mine." I lie. John's a great guy, not flamboyant or cocky.

"Is that Kurt?" I hear Jeff wonder behind me. There is no Kurt. Greg starts howling in laughter.

"Oh well, see ya." John says, grinning self consciously as sirens approach, growing louder.

He peels the snow to the asphalt and takes off towards the north end. I walk back to the boiys. Greg is laughing and Jeff is glowering.

"Why the hell didn't your friend give us a ride?" Jeff yells at me, obviously unable to hear how loud he's talking, looking between Greg and myself because he still has no clue who Kurt is.

Smiling and laughing, Greg steps over to Jeff and takes the orange headphone pad off his left ear. It's so cold that the snow on our heads won't melt.

"There's no Kurt." Greg explains.

"He just stole it." I add as three blue police cars pass by, lights

energetic but obscure and sirens lost, like a wolf pack in the snow. Their tire chains rattle as though muffled in wool.

"Yo Bob, I heard that John's now working undercover for the cops." Greg shouts at the disappearing vehicles. That's what John told me in astronomy. Greg doesn't believe it for a moment.

"Yep, he sure is. What we just saw is to lend credibility to his criminality, so that the car thieves he's going to expose think he's one of them." I explain. Jeff pushes Greg away and places the orange headphone pad back on his ear as though protecting his sanity. The "U" shaped spring thing that goes from ear to ear has bisected the round snow cap on Jeff's head.

"You look like an autopsy victim." Greg laughs. Of course Jeff can't hear, he just grimaces.

So we're standing on the corner near the pay phone that has no chance in hell of ringing right now, it would be astronomical.

The phone rings.

I jump almost out of my boots. At first I think I did it, telekinesis and all. Greg goes over and picks it up. This is soooo weird. Why should the phone ring? It MUST be a wrong number.

"It's Netania." he yells over to us because the snow seems to be falling heavier. Jeff and myself crowd around him purposely, but Jeff's still wearing his headphones, which is very funny, pretending to listen to something he can't hear anyway.

"How'd you find the number?" he asks, "Oh. How'd you know we were here? Oh. Can you give us a ride? Oh. Yeah, bye." He hangs up. Jeff

stifles a yell. Greg pushes us away because we're crowding his space.

"How the hell'd she get the number? And how the hell'd she know we were still here?" I demand to know.

"Information." Greg answers as though Information is omniscient.
Right!

"Oh!" I roll my eyes incredulously.

"She doesn't have a car." I assume.

"No, she has a car."

"She's sick from her bird." I postulate. She says her bird makes her sick sometimes because the bird has herpes or something. I still laugh at that one.

"No, she's not sick. And Becca says hi."

"She's hanging out at the zoo!" I wince.

"Yep."

"There's just no accounting..." I joke, trailing away intentionally. Becca's mom works there. With the polar bears specifically, and with polar bears arctically recently if we wish to speak meteorologically.

"Damn strait there ain't." he answers. It has come to where we abbreviate sentences to save time when we know we're going to say something that the other knows we're going to say.

"Well, I say we walk." I suggest as though we have a choice.

"As though we have a choice." Greg adds. We head down North Avenue as though we have a choice when obviously we really don't. After a few hundred feet of snow kicking, sirens approach again. A red Ford Bronco honks as it passes, turning up Beechmont Drive to disappear in the white

as though blanked out of existence. We're on the other side of the street, in front of a closed gas station. The pursuing police cars get stuck at the bottom of Beechmont and North, lights still going, sirens still futilly howling, wheels frictionlessly spinning.

"Boy, John can drive." Greg whistles as we stand, entertained by the attempts of the police to ascend the hill. It's just not meant to be. John heads back down Beechmont, somehow not skidding out of control, and turns right, towards the north end again. More almost invisible in the white tempest police cars come down Beechmont. I turn away expecting impact but somehow all the vehicles avoid one another to continue the chase.

"It's like Kurt wants the cops to chase him!" Jeff laughs. Greg mouths "Kurt" to me as though he has never heard the word before.

"He does." I assure, as we watch the chase disappear behind a curtain of falling snow, knowing Jeff can't hear me. I know that John's goal is to break the length record each time he's written about in the police blotter published in the local newspaper. It's too crazy to tell anyone and have them believe it.

"You know his goal is to keep escalating the degree of severity of his outings because they're written up in the police blotter section of the paper." I reveal. Maybe that will be believed.

"No way." Greg laughs doubtfully, "And he's working undercover too."

I SHOULD have kept my mouth shut. I'll have to tell Jeff sometime, he'll believe me.

I lose myself and my mind in the cold and confusing landscape as

we hoof across town. Higher brain function gives way to instinctive survival mechanism, I do end up running like a lunatic down the street, many anonymous streets, streets very bright, just to stay warm. The alternative is to freeze to death, which is no alternative.

Along the way, there are many close quartered snowball fights between the three of us and once with the driver of a slow moving, weather immune, graffitied delivery truck we slammed with very compressed projectiles. He got out of his truck dry and all that has to be said is that he got back in his truck wet, though smiling, which was shocking. We expected him to run us over then, since we were keeping to the streets, but he got stuck in the attempt.

The three of us end up hysterically raving about "Chinese people multiplying in the snow!" It's scary and funny and memorable as well as fascinating. How one arrives at "Chinese people multiplying in the snow!" I don't ever want to know. Though I do remember a certain logical course leading to that conclusion.

I almost pee my pants along the way both because I'm laughing so hard and from the cold. I'm proud I can find something that funny. How we separate and how I specifically arrive home I don't know. I just realize I'm home because where I live is right in front of me. Home, I quickly decide to forget the whole traumatic, arctic ordeal. I go to sleep with all my clothes on but for my jacket and boots. The snow on my head I expect will melt. I know I'm going to wake up dripping and sweating as I cover myself with three heavy, red, down filled blankets. I sleep without awareness of anything. I sleep deep.

Part Two

Sleep time should be separate from one's waking hours. There should be a distinction, for if there isn't one is not alive. There is a need for standards of comparison.

I wake up dripping and sweating, dying for water. My mouth and throat feel as though I've gargled acid while my lips feel like I've been kissing dry ice. Hoarse from yelling "Chinese people multiplying in the snow," and chapped from winter's touch, I lay sopping.

I had a dream that I was roller skating practically naked through school making a public spectacle of myself in my dirty, once white underwear that often appears publicly in my nightmares.

I wasn't even wearing socks! If one is wearing socks in a dream then it is not a nightmare, without socks one is in trouble.

Just another one of those uninhibited and humiliating dream situations that really reflects — my insecurity — and desire to be reckless. Never could I actually do such a thing, I'd have myself — committed if I did. I was loving it secretly because I was almost lucid dreaming. Lucidity was only an arms length away, which means I'd never have reached it.

Lucidity must flow from within.

Greg knows about lucid dreaming and flying off of K2. The trick is to know you're dreaming before losing control to deeper parts of oneself, which is sometimes practically impossible for me. If one can do that then one can control the dream and do things like put one's

clothes on while roller skating almost naked amongstone's friends. The problem is that if one's aware one is dreaming, is one really dreaming?

Perhaps dreams are to be remembered, not experienced.

After I patiently focus on my fuzzy, blue digital clock across the room, I discover that it's eight o'clock at night. I've slept for four hours which seem like for days in a sauna fully clothed. While lucidity must flow from within, sweat always flows from within.

My crotch is sweating most of all, and from a scientific perspective, probably lowering my sperm count. But I still continue to lay soused in darkness staring at thosefuzzy blue numbers.

With my feet bicycle kicking, I roll down my covers nto a bundle at the bottom of my bed. The difference is immense. My gametes are saved from being cooked, not that I'm desiring to be particularly fertile.

The phone rings. I half expected it to. Leaning over and fumbling blindly, I pick up the receiver finally. I half expect anything to happen when I've just awakened.

"Hello?" I growl dry throated, wincing and hoping it's not Netania, who'll have called Information, which will have told her I was now awake. These things can happen.

There's a pause.

"Dis ees Colonel Akhmed Olibabba!!" I yell into the phone like the angry, heavily accented dictator addicted to the dollar and the torture of his people. Then I hang up, regretting yelling with such a sore throat. I know the phone will ring again and it's not Netania.

The phone of course rings again. I haven't let go of it so I pick

it up at once. This happens often.

"Colonel Olibabba?" the voice asks timidly.

"Dis ees Olibabba." I respond calmly.

"The American pigs are strafing the oil refineries, the refineries are burning." the voice tells me cautiously.

"Attack them through dee flames you fool!!!" I yell. The caller laughs.

"What's up boiy?" Greg laughs through the lines connecting our telephones together, which is less then a quarter mile walking distance but knowing how huge bureaucracies work, we're probably routed through Hawaii. I don't laugh for fear of ripping apart my vocal cords. I'm also sticky, clammy, probably partially snowblind, and tired in a not so much fatigued by stressed out way. I need to move.

I've a sudden urge to do something drastic, like forget my present life and start over. Fugue would be wonderful; that sudden, spontaneous condition in which a person just disappears to begin life anew much like a caterpillar. Until someone realizes that the butterfly in their life has a totally different past than the one they've been told. The scary part is that the person who fugues submerges the knowledge too, convincing their self to forget so well that they practically do.

Like lucidity, fugue must flow from within. To want is to be unable to attain directly, at least for fugue and lucid dreaming anyway. Sweat, on the other hand, has a mind all its own.

I can behave humorously though I'll be feeling pretty grim. That's my release, the worse I feel about everything for whatever reason the

more jokes I'll tell to relieve that pent up frustration.

Now I'm not in a good mood, nothing's flowing but sweat.

"Did I wake you Colonel?" Greg wonders as his dog barks in the background. His dog is slightly insane, it hears voices and attacks invisible threats. Oh to be canine and insane!

"Nah." I cough dryly, "How's Wolfie?" All dogs are called Wolfie now.

"He's trying to eat the neighbor." Greg informs. "The neighbor" is the code word which stands for whatever his dog is hallucinating. I can hear that the dog is running around his house. If it had a human voice it would be shricking "I've got you now, almost" repeatedly. At least the dog's not in pain, it has just got a short circuit somewhere in its cranium. And it never stops wagging its tail.

"Oh." I understandably reply, "Eating the old neighbor. Do they make strait jackets for dogs?" Oh to have a tail! What I could do with a tail.

"He's not that bad, once he catches the neighbor." Greg insists. The people closest are always the last to admit that there's anything wrong. Greg's dog goes through more cowhide doggy bones than probably every sane dog is his neighborhood. If the dog is gnawing on one of those fake bones, there's a good chance he thinks he's gnawing on whatever he thinks he seeing simply because he does it with such ravenous zeal.

With a tail I'd be able to chase it around in circles like an idiot, I'd have an excuse. Now I'm just an idiot, going nowhere, tailess.

"Pick me up!" Greg pseudo demands, "Yo Bob, pick me up!" That's

Greg's Jeff impersonation based on my Jeff impersonation based on Jeff when he calls me demandingly.

"You sound like Jeff." I tell him, knowing that was his intention though he doesn't, "O.K. Helmet. I'll be right over as soon as I take a shower and wipe the brown gook out of my dog's eyes." I hang up quickly. The brown gook thing is one of those Jeff chores he'll tell me about when I really am going to pick him up. Greg will like the feigned rudeness.

Amazingly, we have never had an argument, a real argument. Never. I speculate that we release whatever tension that builds up from whatever by acting seemingly mad and having pseudo arguments that seem real to outsiders, until one of us starts laughing at how convincing we get. I couldn't really get mad, even if he ran over my foot, which he did once.

Maybe if he shot off one of my balls with a shotgun or something comparable I might get a little mad, maybe.

I remember Greg and his older brother Roj were driving in front of me as we were leaving the gym where we'd been working out. At the red light outside, in broad daylight, Roj spontaneously gets out of his marcon Monte Carlo, a huge car, and starts shouting at me while pointing to his rear chrome bumper. As though I'd hit him!

So I get out of the green monster van as well.

"THAT'S A @!!#\$¢&¢* CHROME BUMPER!!!" Roj hollered repeatedly as though all explanation and importance lay in the fact that the bumper was chrome.

"THAT'S NOT A CHROME BUMPER! LOOK AT MY TRUCK, NOW THAT'S A @!!#¢&%¢*

CHROME BUMPER!!" I kept yelling back.

A few people walking by stopped to scratch their heads, confused about chrome to begin with and leaving even more bewildered. An old couple pulled up next to us to mail a letter at a corner mailbox and couldn't help but stare, mouths agape in their expensive, black, "Who cares about miles per gallon" Cadillac.

We made a foul mouthed, senseless spectacle for no reason. After several light changes, we suddenly stopped yelling, jumped into the other's vehicle, and took off, leaving our nosy audience shocked.

Greg was breathless with laughter in the passenger seat of Roj's car. We switched back at the next light, shaking hands like Vikings after a pillage. The whole episode was golden.

Feeling disgusted in my soggy state, I decide to rise and cleanse myself. Lights still off, I descend my super steep bare stairs, open and close some doors in a similarly dark house, and end up in the bathroom. I sit down with my head in my hands, raking my hair with my eyes shut. My scalp feels like it's on fire. Maybe I got frostbite up there. Maybe.

This is my fortress of solitude, a fortress of solitude for a fortress of solitude. It's fitting.

Someone knocks on the door. I don't answer. It's a given that as soon as I close the bathroom door someone will knock on it. They'll go away to return to knock louder and call my name as though that will magically unlock the lock.

I take my time washing my face with the coldest of water possible,

then ascend the stairs after opening and closing some of the very same doors I'd previously, groggily opened and closed, ending up in my room, sitting on the top stair. I can't take a shower with someone calling my name every minute. While waiting for whomever to use the bathroom, I almost fall asleep, leaning against the wall. I jump up out of sleep's slippery grip like a momentarily frightened child and turn on the lights.

My eyes take a long time to adjust, I must be snow blind to some degree. Then I can see around me, therefore it's not serious. Like most of today. Being snow blind would be exciting, a rare and interesting condition. I look around trying not to appear as though I'm probing because someone else lives in the room with me who is invisible that I don't want to offend.

I look around quickly but can't tell where he is. Who he is I have a very good idea. When I was young I discovered his existence as I awoke and opened my eyes ever so slightly without moving. That's how I was able to see him, because I was temporarily balanced between sleep and wakefulness, a feeling much like balancing on two legs of a chair and almost falling but catching oneself at the last moment.

He was sitting on an antique, high backed, wooden dining chair which used to be in the room I used when young in a different house. Now he is much more careful.

I've tried numerous times to catch him visible again, but since I'm no longer unaware of his subtle presence, I do not believe it's possible to so easily repeat. Still, he watches me when I sleep and is always guarding me where ever I go, invisibly, faithfully. It's consoling, though

he never makes a sound, not a peep.

I do not know his name and his face is a blur, yet I do remember from what I'd seen that one time that he's a black mustachioed, long haired Frenchman with an exquisite rapier, splendid swashbuckling clothes with many marvelous ruffles, and he has a large, white feather adorned, three pointed hat. He wears almost all white except for the hat and knee high leather boots, which are black.

He is a clever one.

I can't even dubiously guess at his purpose though I feel he's waiting for some important event which will occur at some point in my future. Particularly if I try to look for his shadow intentionally I don't even sense him. He's available only out of the corner of my eye and even then only as a fleeting impression.

He IS a clever one.

As a matter of respect and faith I accept his intangible and invisible companionship. By always looking for him I would be breaking a silent code of honor.

I don't have to think about him, he takes care of himself.

My room looks like someone came in and stirred everything up with a very large stick. I fluctuate between cleanliness and carelessness almost as often as I fluctuate between loneliness and an insatiable need to be alone.

How can one find what one wants unless one looks for what one wants?

I'll know I've got what I want when I find what I'm looking for yet I

don't know what that is. I can easily confuse myself.

The wind blowing outside which rattles the windows, and the branches scraping against the windowpanes, communicates that there is snow on the ground. I am projecting what I already know and being told through such hints that winter has indeed settled itself over the landscape where everyone lives in crowded isolation.

Whenever it snows I feel as though the world has been given a second chance, that I particularly have been given a second chance. The virgin purity is fleeting at best, it must be harnessed or it spoils quickly. I must get enveloped in its breath to chance finding what I lack for there is possibility in movement.

There are so many indelible memories I have while outside in the snows of past winters. In the middle of a blizzard Ciaran picked me up in a woody station wagon driven by this girl from Pelham named someone. Her girlfriends were packed into the station wagon like Amazons on vacation. I only knew Ciaran and his girlfriend. I felt like a stallion, surrounded by so many curves and handbags of all shapes and sizes.

The car was so heavy from being so full that when turning corners the back would kick out. She drove to Pelham High and proceeded to do doughnuts in the empty, blanketed parking lot though she didn't even have a permit to drive never mind a license.

The bright parking lot was an untouched sheet of deep snow when we started, when she finished it was as wrinkled as the sweet prom queen's dress the day after the ball and resembled a strip mine with its concentric circles and figure eights.

Some of the best times I've ever had were unplanned, with me first

as an unwilling captive. I have an immeasurable awe for that young lady who I only met once and who discovered how to express herself vehicularly, glacially.

I take a towel off the crowded floor and proceed to shower aquatically downstairs, as opposed to deodorantly, while singing merrily about abandonment and revenge. The sweat must be ebbed, the shower is cool.

I hope you get what you deserve.
Love is a reaping and sowing,
A taking and giving, a providing
Now I'm deciding.
Someone who can't see how they hurt me
Makes being cold and unconcerned
an easy choice for me.

After dressing in three pairs of cozy white socks, jeans, three sweatshirts, the outer one a forest green and hooded, my slightly damp construction boots, and Greg's purple N.R. varsity baseball hat, I sneak from my house without anyone seeing me go out the front door.

My family's eyes are glued to several television sets located strategically throughout the house. Everyone can choose to do what they want but so help me if I end up addicted to distraction I'll shoot myself.

Vegetables are for gardens and meals, television is suicide.

To me a self inflicted gunshot wound leading to a slow death by bleeding or even worse, and instant death, is a better way to die, a comparable death at least, to television suicide. Such an ending means totally denying one's will to live and endure, even if it means failure in spite of total commitment to success. Suicide in whatever form is a willingness to quit and turn anger inward, turning the anger against

the very fact that one exists.

The Antichrist.

Such an exercise in despair is an acceptance of defeat and an abandonment of the belief that courage is giving all no matter consequence. I'm somewhere in the vicinity of both extremes, far from suicide but aware of its ramifications, giving one hundred percent but feeling I'm not getting near that amount in return.

In bails out the front door before a commercial break, when everyone jumps up to run around frantic like beheaded chickens till the commercials are over.

The present deal is that I can drive the green van so long as I pay for gas. When it's all one has, it's all one has. I've run out of gas many times.

Snow is falling thickly outside like cotton balls I discover as I tread to the monster. The van is chock a block full of shit, the same old shit that seem to linger behind me like junk in the back of my mind, every so often shifting and resettling. It's dark so I don't have to think about it, I don't have to think about anything inside the green monster van because it will stay dark, even the speedometer light is out.

The green monster somehow got that nickname from me, probably expressing my desire to drive it off a cliff, jumping out before the edge

to see it consumed in an inferno of destruction.

Written above the radio in big, thick, penciled letters somewhere on the vertical face of the dashboard is ANTICHRIST. It's dark, I can't see if it's still there. The title is Antichrist because to drive this January 27th Robert Cullen

is to jeopardize oneself, like signing a pact, ride in here and safety is the last consideration.

My father has erased it several times superstitiously, explaining how he had to give a priest a ride home one day. The priest, after having seen what was written, supposedly excommunicated our whole family or something.

No, I don't believe a word either.

I fire the engine up. Amazingly it'll start every time in spite of two hundred thousand miles plus. I must let the engine heat up though or she'll stall. Meanwhile, I search for the seat belt blindly because the speedometer needle sagged and the light which illuminated it had no purpose anymore and fell into despair. It's better this way, I'd be scared if I saw the coffee puddle and danish monster on the dashboard.

I wear thick, puffy, gray ski gloves because though the engine will warm up, the interior won't, there's no heat.

The ski gloves bring to mind the time I went skiing with Ciaran. The thought makes me too cold to want to recall that traumatic day at the moment. Let's just say it was a memorable collision.

It's the little things which make the difference someone says. It must have been someone who wanted to convince people to lower their expectations, for things like food and shelter are by no means trivial. I'm not upset at the moment since I don't expect any heat.

Who wants comfort?

Comfort zones lead to stagnancy. Better to be burtle.

So I just justified the Antichrist's lack of warmth, finding it ironic

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that a vehicle possessed by Hell's landlord has no heat. Beezelbub is a slumlord. Oh, these excuses people use to console themselves! We blame someone external when there's no one else accountable for decisions made but ourselves. It's freezing out there, it's freezing in here, and it's likely freezing in Hell if things are consistent. Hell is an abstract projection for those who construct themselves as seducable. Hell exists only in people's minds, and people are cold these days, so consistently cold. So I'm going driving in the snow, no, some things don't change thankfully and unfortunately. It depends on what those specific things are, my fluctuating attitude, and the weather.

"'I guess it all depends.' he said thoughtfully." I narrate aloud. It's said that the difference between someone alone who's crazy from hearing voices and someone alone who isn't crazy for hearing similar voices is that the people who are sane are so because they know that the voices they hear are their own.

"I hope it was me who just said what I just said and what I'm saying."

I muse aloud, smiling. I'm the funniest person around when alone, obviously a contest without competition. I'm also grateful that I'm not "normal,"

Normal means unimpressive, unnoticable, neutral, non threatening, stagnant.

Normal is a lined sheet of paper, a flat world, a brain pickled in a jar of formaldehyde. Normal is not knowing the value of one's fingerprint.

Fingerprints are like snowflakes, unique. Anything but normal thankfully, vague and alive, I head over to Greg's house on a river of snow resembling the hero returned through slowly plunging, tumbling, gusting, frozen confetti and tickertape.

Heroes are for spectators. Sheep are spectators all their lives, which is why the wolves never have to worry though outnumbered. I have

a hero within me yearning for expression, I have an invisible companion who symbolizes that hero in many ways.

Greg's waiting outside his house, which is in a strange, crowded place called Sycamore Park, where all the streets are one way, forming a box encompassing blocks that one must drive around in circles several times to magically escape. At least that's how I sometimes feel when picking him up. He's wearing his gray, tweed over coat and my blue corduroy Fighting Irish baseball hat, black sweatpants, and his white, ratty hightops.

Through the wall of plowed, pushed aside snow that has been created by some city worker just doing his job, Greg trudges. He looks for a moment like a surfer battling a frozen wave. When waves don't move, one must climb them.

"Bob-O." he hails after opening the passenger door and sitting down inside. The Frenchman knew to move minutes ago and did, behind the drop cloths in back. He slams the door because that's the only way to shut it.

"Nice hat." I comment as Greg looks futilly around to see if Antichrist has been erased.

"Glad you like it because it's yours." he reminds me, groping for the seat belt. Especially in the green monster no one takes any chances.

"I'm glad it's dark in here or I'd probably be frightened to death of what I can't see now." he admits, unable to find the penciled words.

"I know it's mine, that's why I like it." I answer, turning slowly,
"Have you ever seen so much snow?"

"That's not a bad hat you're wearing either." he notes. Our conversations are sometimes remarkably disjointed. "No, actually I haven't. I'm a summer man. The summer is for me. Sunshine and warmth, bikinis and babes, long days and..."

"I get the point." I interrupt, "You like the hat."

"What's the plan?" he asks.

"I don't know, you're the navigator." I respond, shrugging. If I always decided where to go I'd never experience anything beyond me.

"Is that sort of like alligator?" he wonders.

"Yes." I answer.

"Just making sure. O.K. The plan..." he begins, creating one as he speaks, "Is to get to Netania's house somehow." Now that's challenging.

"Shall we take the dogs?" I wonder, referring to absolutely nothing. Netania lives in the boondocks, where it's very hilly and real estate is very expensive and everyone is severely typical, leading lives of silent frustration.

"Nah, the dogs are tired from the Idid rod I raced on Sunday." he explains. The Idid rod takes weeks.

"That's very fast. How many dog's did you use?"

"Three hundred." he responds, stamping snow from his feet. No wonder he was able to do it in a day.

"Shall we take the monster green van?" I ask, which is irrelevant because it's the only option, therefore it's not an option.

"We shall take the monster green van because the dogs are tired, and though it's slower, I'll not complain." Greg reveals, kicking some

junk at his feet. I can deal with that mission, he just had to formally state it.

Netania's brother Etan might be home. Etan is someone I wouldn't mind being stuck out in the middle of a desert with while dying of thirst. We'd have a ball and die laughing over the stupidest of things. He comes up with the strangest ideas that have just the right balance between insanity and possibility. He wants us to rob a bank dressed as politicians. He believes it would be legal then. Etan is in my English class with John Brettmeister, who's writing a short story describing how he steals cars and how the police chase him but don't catch him.

"Haven't been in the green monster in a while." Greg notes, picking up something metal and dropping it back on top of all the other junk at his feet.

"It's been a long time since we sent you off to fight for our beloved country junior." I twang in a terrible midwestern accent, "It's too bad you lost your testicles. You know what Grandma used to say, 'No balls, no babies.'" I stop at a red light very carefully since there's a half a foot of snow on the road.

"Well, it was for a good cause. Nobody should stand in the way of American freedom, we had to teach them a lesson, god damn foreigners." Greg answers in the same lilt. The windshield wipers hiss back and forth to needlessly stop accumulation. It's so cold that the glass stays dry. I turn them off before they break again. They're all that's left, struggling but lonely, wanting to break and usually temporarily successful.

"A-yeah A-Bob." Greq exclaims like Jeff would about Juan when Juan

shows up for lunch.

"Easy there Jeff." I laugh. See, every day at lunch Juan would wander in and Jeff would suddenly shout "Yeah Juan." regardless of whatever he was doing, even in the middle of sentences.

Our breaths are a visible, fleeting fog.

"It's burtle. I feel like I have visible halitosis." Greg rhetorically announces, rolling down his window and debelting. Burtle means BURRR as in cold and TLE as in till next summer. Sadly the open window doesn't matter temperature wise.

"You do have visible halitosis." I respond because I can't ignore such a set up. Standing on the seat, Greg sticks himself out the window vertically. He's nuts when we're on a mission. He comes back rejuvenated and straps himself in again.

"I have just gone to the crows nest, captain, and I'm happy to report that the crows are still nesting." he informs. Where'd that come from? Sometimes I don't know who's worse.

"Captain's private log: Today I thought my navigator was going to abandon ship." I tell myself aloud, "He still insists on circling the ship around and around until everyone stops calling him the navigator and starts calling him the alligator."

It takes something like five times longer to drive to Netania's house. Luckily we were wrong and there aren't mobs of Chinese spontaneously regenerating out of the snow in geometric proportions. Part of the problem causing the delay is seeing, seeing in the snow falling. It's traffic lights be damned. The other part of the problem are hills which almost eat us up several times. Fortunately the van has snow tires on it. Actually it always has snow tires on it, which is good luck, as well as illegal. Politicians are accepted as crooks, above the law, and snow tires in summer are illegal. People really amaze me at how gullible and naive they allow themselves to be.

The north end of New Rochelle is a version of the promised land, someone's version of a promised, upper middle class dreamland. Precisely because it is a supposed dreamland there is no thought as to how this version of a promised land really exists, what it really means. It is not my version of a promised land, I don't believe in promised lands, everyone is entitled, promised lands mean gifts. I find homogeneously Caucasian, restrictive neighborhoods with front lawns long and "No parking on street" signs anything but an idea of paradise, if I had an idea of paradise. Paradise is stagnant.

Such places are symptoms reflecting the values of the inhabitants, the "I got mine"s.

My own tastes are more rural; low population densities and porches where one can sit on starry nights on a swinging chair sharing an intimate conversation with someone close while knowing that your neighbor, whose name you know, is a good ten minute walk away through the dark, surrounding woods.

Like Utopia, nowhere, so is my idea of where I'd like to live. I will have to make it.

The north end is a place where every home is cared for by immigrant landscapers with leafblowers on their backs, where immigrant maids break their backs, and where every resident pretends a role, living a few yards away from their souls which are always trying to catch up, so they must constantly be on the move morally, one step ahead of conscience.

The cars are large, German and Swedish mostly, the roofs are slate, the trees are sprayed with pesticide because nature is ultimately considered obscene, and the closets are packed with the skeletons and abandoned convictions of yesteryear.

The suburbs are where the living dead pretend they are in heaven after the severely underpaid help leaves by five o'clock. That's the unwritten law and secretly the living dead are ashamed of their empty, self sequestered lives and are always overtly willing to prove otherwise.

The half acre plantations of the upper middle class are where leaves are harvested each fall to be piled high alongside the street but might as well be cotton. The children are sown like seeds each to become a middle aged stranger to themselves, feeling lost at forty like they're hanging from a tightrope by two greasy fingers.

Midnight heart attacks and silent breakdowns abound. Anything physical is menial, anything honest is not good business.

Without the pretentiousness of summer, the mindlessness of golf and the condescension of the beach club, they're forced in winter to take refuge in a house they regard as the pinnacle of their success though January 27th Robert Cullen

they know it's more of a prison than a dwelling.

A bottle of something soothing, whether a brain damaging liquid or a nerve numbing prescription helps Mommy and Daddy through the day and helps them to forget the jobs they hate while slowly those two slippery fingers are losing their grasp on the steel cord they hang from, their fingers becoming as weak as their own wills to keep their true spirits strong.

Below is a chasm of repressed truths and feelings they've been avoiding all their lives. And when they fall, and they eventually do, sometimes they even try to cry out. But then it's too late.

This certainly is Utopia, nowhere.

I park, or beach, the green van on the dark street outside a pine tree encircled house by running it up and over the snow embankment created by a snowplow. We're at a forty five degree angle.

"Holy cow! You parked on a glacier!" Greg remarks, pushing the passenger door open against gravity since he's now higher than me. I open my door and practically spill out onto the fluffy, uncompacted street. I must fight gravity to close the door though.

The street is a trough, like a bobsled run, with low walls of snow piled to the sides. But this is not the Olympics.

Netania's house is strange in that it's surrounded by big evergreen conifers growing close together like a throng. The ground underneath is a carpet of rusty needles and sometimes sticky pine cones. Very little snow has fallen around her house because it's all caught up in the trees surrounding. There's a slight sprinkling of snow on the rusty pine needle

carpeting for effect.

In very dim light from above the front door we walk up the steep, short driveway that's an amalgam of ice, snow, pine needles, salt, and asphalt all solidly frozen together. So much for chemistry, salt, water, and the lowering of freezing points.

Her house is made of white bricks. I don't like white bricks but I guess they're better than yellow bricks and not as mundane as red bricks. White bricks make the house look like it's made out of candy. But Hansel and Gretel won't be visiting either.

Ciaran once made a medieval castle out of sugar cubes that caused his house to become infested with Amazon ants with sweet tooths. It was under his bed for months, the pillaging was discovered when the ants got careless with their demolition and the tower fell with a loud crunch.

O.K., so they were not only Amazon ants, they were co-ed.

I don't like yellow bricks, they look like they're made out of cake mix. Red bricks resemble agglutinated blood. Call them irrational peeves. I fully admit that I have no control over the color of brick that constitutes my friend's houses and therefore I shouldn't get so involved in what it all means. Intry, they're only bricks.

"Do you know that there's tons of snow in the boughs of these trees?"

I warn Greg while he composes a song by means of the unanswered doorbell.

I'm an encyclopedia of trivia. When I get the opportunity I inform whoever I'm with.

"Nah." he responds without reservation, as though I'd offered him another helping after he has decided to eat no more. I'm usually coming

up with facts and observations he rarely believes, to his credit.

"I think her car is here." I recall, looking down at to I can see of the street through the trees. It's either her car or a mound of snow with an antennae. They can't park in the driveway, the cars slide down onto the street from the ice that won't melt until March because of the thick canopy overhead that blocks the sun.

Her car has been blocked in by the Olympic snowplow Zamboni machine ordered by the city for just that purpose, so they can ticket later. Luckily I parked on the right side of the street or I probably would have parked on top of her thinking it was snow.

There's no answer at the door though Greghas pretty much composed a whole aria with one instrument in one note. Her parents are away if I remember correctly.

"Where could she be?" Greg wonders, kicking the icy slate doorstep.

"I bet she's at Becca's." I guess, since Becca did say hi when Netania called this afternoon, which of course doesn't really mean they're at Becca's at all.

"What should we do?" Greg ponders. I've an idea.

"Let's break in." I announce, really loud, so that if a neighbor's putting out garbage or walking a dog then that neighbor will call the police and we'll get arrested. Greg shakes his head negatively.

We'll need a better plan. Then I remember.

"Hey, you're the alligator. You decide." I realize. I wasn't born on a cabbage truck or something like that, I'm not going to think of something which I'll be held particularly accountable for later.

A car pulls up and instinctively we tell each other to go hide, so we hide around the corner of the house to the left of the front door. Peeking around while I keep asking "Who is it?", being purposely annoying, Greg tells me it's Etan. His parents aren't home either. Since Netania and Etan are twins.

"Let's beat him up." I suggest in a whisper. I'm not serious.

"No, let's run him up a tree." Greg laughs. Because Etan is Netania's twin, they have the same curly, dark hair. Except his is shorter and he'll run up the tree in all likelihood. Netania would stand her ground and probably kick the crap out of both of us, which is not to say that she's a butch. She a Netania.

"O.K." I quickly answer. It's a better idea. That's why Greg's the alligator. Together, screaming from around the corner of his house, we run at Etan as he walks up the driveway.

"AGHHH!" he shrieks like an old woman, the way men often do when fearing for their lives. Turning around, sliding down half the driveway on one foot, then jumping to the side, Etan races up the nearest tree like a squirrel. We run across the driveway, down the side where there's no ice, and to the bottom of the tree like hounds who have cornered their quarry.

It's sad to see someone trapped.

"Let's thrown snowballs at him." Greg urges, even more exuberant than when he suggested we run Etan up the tree. Greg is definitely on a roll with the excellent ideas tonight. Going back to the street, we make a few snowballs and carefully walk up the driveway. "OH! So it's Greg and Bob! You two mutants! I thought you were my friends but noooo, you guys chased me up here." Etan pants from somewhere above us, "And snowballs too. But you can't even see me." True, but because Etan won't shut up, though our snowballs miss, they come close. All we need to do is to kill Etan, that would be great, that's all we need to happen. I'd say the alligator did it, no one would understand, and I'd be locked up in a soft cell. Greg would get the chair.

"Ow!" Etan yells after Greg throws the last snowball, "Ha, missed, fooled you."

"What are you, some kind of wimpy pinecone?" I taunt. Etan's the guy in English who I compete with to tell the dumbest, corniest, stupidest joke.

"Oh, so that's what you're doing now, teasing me. What. Are. You. Guys. Some. Kind. Of. Softie. Stuck. On. The. Ground. Weaklings?"

I smile because Etan kills me sometimes. The old "I'm reading off of notecards" thing.

"If you don't come down I'm going to tell Bob that your sister can beat you up and does." Greg yells up. Of course I now know.

"You wouldn't!" he warns, playing along.

"She can and does." Greg tells me loudly, "And what's more, he wears his mother's underwear to bed."

"That's it, I've had it." Etan hollers. There's a shaking above us, at first gentle. Then a sliding like sand, sifting noise. Except this sand is snow.

"UT OH!" I yell too late. Like a blanket of lead thrown on top of

above by the boughs until Etan shook it all loose. I shut my eyes and hold my breath as I go down underneath.

When it's over, which is only a second later, I lift myself up out of the avalanche. There are two good feet of snow around me, almost like a spotlight compared to the surrounding dark ground. Greg pops up a few feet away laughing hysterically.

It's contagious, I start and can't stop either. I hear Etan laughing proudly above us. I've lost my hat and so has Greg. Or I should say I've lost Greg's hat and he has lost mine.

Then there's a loud snap above that fills my stomach with fear.

After a violent brushing sound, Etan thumps to the ground flatly, between Greg and myself. He brings snow with him but it's only a dusting. We are not laughing anymore.

Etan doesn't move. He's face down.

I prod him several times before he rises to sit in the snow dazed.

There's an indentation in the shape of his body beneath him.

"Haaa-haaaaa-haaaaaa!" he suddenly laughs and won't stop, rolling onto his back. We all laugh because Etan could really have been hurt along with anyone he might have fallen on.

"I waarrrrrned d'you!" I tell Greg when I've released all nervous tension through laughter.

"Nah." he purposely echoes his previous, obviously incorrect remark.

Then we all stop to look around at one another. Finding the hats, I take

mine and give Greg his.

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Another car pulls up, a big yellow station wagon I've heard called the Becca mobile. It's huge, heavy, unsinkable, obviously traits perfect for any weather.

The falling snow has picked up in its intensity but is still unable to breach the Douglas Fir cult we're embraced by. Two bundles approach, one wearing an olive drab arctic coat with a long, zippered up, fur lined, snout like hood. The other wears a purple softball jacket that has New Ro in yellow letters across the front. That is Netania.

She smiles at the three of us as they walk up the driveway carefully. Both are wearing jeans and leather boots something like mine.

"I don't want to even guess what's going on here." she chides, stepping into the snow we're laying in. Holy thick, black, curly hair!

Her companion just stands shivering silently except for teeth rattling.

"Who's your friend, Sir Edmund Hillary?" Greg jokes.

"No, it's Rebecca." Etan corrects.

"I know that." Greg laughs, throwing some snow at him pseudo-annoyed because Etan's being pseudo-stupid.

The person in the army green, arctic parks that must be very warm steps near me and kicks my leg.

"What was that for?" I retreat, trying to look up into her concealing snout. She doesn't answer, just keeps shivering and chattering.

"I have to pee." Netania reveals, running towards her house but running in such away that she appears to be in slow motion, trying not to slip. Greg gets up and recklessly skids across the driveway past her to block her way.

"Stop it you fool, I'm going to pee my pants!" she cries out. I'd love to see her belt him one. Becca actually moves, haphazardly, like someone frightened to death, and unzips her concealing hood thing. Holy what color is her hair, red or blonde?

"I...mm...free...zing...to...dea...th." she tells me in broken, chattered syllables.

"How. Can. You. Be. Cold. Wearing. That?" Etan disputes. She steps quickly and kicks him hard in the side.

"Damn baby!" I comment, getting up so I'm not bullied too, "He's right, you can't be cold. Maybe you have malaria. Have you been taking your atabrine tablets?" I ask her this seriously, poking her parka's fluffyness. Those words are from some movie only I've seen. I've always been drawn to Rebecca. Maybe it's her evasiveness, or her frailty. She's like a little bird.

"I don't have malaria." she growls at me. I'm constantly patronizing her. She zips up her concealing snout.

"No! Come back!" I urge. "Good thing you're not claustrophobic. By the way, can you eat ants with that thing?"

"Good thing you only weigh a hundred pounds or I'd maul you." Etan adds. I jump in front of her before she kicks him again. She kicks me instead.

"Becca used to be such a nice girl!" I tell Etan without taking my eyes off her.

"I'M FREEZING TO DEATH!" she yells, "Can't you understand?" Etan gets up and shakes himself off.

"Well, I'm going inside to hemorrhage." he plans. I'm not going inside because I'm not getting herpes from Netania's cockapoo or whatever kind of bird it is, even if such contagion is actually impossible. I don't want to find out. So I'm standing with Rebecca alone suddenly. She's got all the symptoms of malaria and I'm trying to avoid tropical bird-diseases.

"Why do people cut school?" I wonder, knowing she's not going to answer.

"Why do people freeze to death in the middle of a conversation?" I continue, taking may hat off and putting it back on after adjusting the size. Still no response. The hood of my dark green sweatshirt is filled with snow, I shake it out awkwardly.

"I have beer in my car." she reveals between clenched teeth, "It's warm but it's beer." Warmth is very important if your freezing to death from malaria.

"Great." I respond instantly, "Except I must admit that warm beer makes me sleepy."

"Good, maybe you'll shut up for a while." she mumbles just loud enough so I can hear then unzips her snout again. I grin because maybe I'm rubbing off on people, much to my surprise. So we walk down the driveway diligently, she leads. I'm prepared to fall with her if she slips, I don't think I'd be able

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to help myself for I have attached myself with a strong grip to her hood.

Crossing the lost street after cautiously looking left, right, then left again for bobsledders and lungers, we get into her car that's quickly disappearing.

"This is an igloo now." she notes amused while rummaging through stuff behind the front seat. She sits down with a brown paper shopping bag on her lap and unzippers her jacket.

"Doesn't the snow seem to make the world clean again?" I sigh.

"Sure." she answers. I guess a conversation isn't what she's in the mood for.

"I guess we're going to have to get our asses in gear, we're almost out of school." I nod, opening a vent by my foot so we don't die. She covers my mouth with a very cold hand. I get the point and smile, these are the days. She gives me a warm bottle of some generic brand of brew that just says "Beer" on its white and black label. Ahh, nothing but the best. And in peaceful silence we both eventually fall asleep, leaning on one another in many ways.

Spelunking

Part One

Becca was in an unforgettable elective creative writing class along with John Brettmeister and Etan. So unique and so complementary an atmosphere existed there that things were kept interesting and worthwhile.

We sat in a circle of some twenty people and in a very real sense were forced to face ourselves. There I felt I wasn't just wasting time like in chemistry and there I felt I wasn't just wasting away like in chemistry.

Chem. was the low point of all low points, not because of subject matter but because of the teacher, Mrs. O'Brady. I try to erase the scripted catechism of her monkey see, monkey do mentality. In actuality the class wasn't taught anything but was supposedly taught by a supposed teacher so incompetent it was scary.

I didn't learn a thing, no one was allowed to think, wonder, or question without being treated as a heretic. I hope O'Brady has totally lost her mind, she was so close when I was around.

Creative Writing lasts because we were treated as humans. The best is remembered eagerly, the worst we try to let go of. And I cannot forget some people, like Becca.

Becca was my special someone that I would tell little pointless nothings sweet and sometimes suggestive to just for the sake of flirtatious friendship. Such innocence I long to have flowing through me again. Those feelings of traveling into a country new, light, feminine,

emotionally dangerous, and necessary disappeared somewhen ago. No other female will ever be the same, she was my first infatuation. There may be greater loves but never another Becca.

Talking with her felt like being on stage in front of the whole world, adrenalin at maximum, every word immensely important for no apparent, practical reason, with every silence a sign of possible spurning. We traced around the obvious, never admitting to one another the unmistakable.

She was to be forever out of reach for any other type of relationship besides the conveniently casual.

What we had will always be special to me, hard as it is to understand exactly what that something was. I wouldn't have traded those feelings of want, fear, and carefulness for anything, even when I felt as though part of me was freezing and the other part boiling, which were the best moments, when caught between so many new impulses. But now those feelings are just memories, tattered, black and white ideas slowly slipping away, in the process of being lost inevitably. So suddenly we left our common crossroad in different directions, never knowing what might have been if situations had been different. The same is true with Etan and others, lost to circumstance.

Etan I remember as someone with short, black, curly hair whomI could share stupidity with, an intentionally humorous, boundless stupidity that bordered occasionally on the profound and usually on the very oddly inane.

From "Don't trees in wintertime look turned upside-down, showing their roots where their branches once were when it was warm?" to "Can turtles really crawl out of their shells, and if they can, how do you

think they look naked?" we ranged, a landscape bizarre and of our own creation.

One time we got shovels and started digging at night in his neighbor's yard, convinced that because it was wintertime the tree we were excavating would have leaves and branches growing in the hard ground like roots since the roots were now where the branches once were. It must have been the moon.

They called the cops and we ran in the nick of time without ever finding out. In the paper the next day an incident was reported: some individual or group of individuals tried to steal a tree in someone's back yard, a someone who happened to live right next door to Etan. It was assumed to be connected to a theft at a local car dealership the same night. John came to school that morning driving a shiny, new, white B.M.W.

For that same week, Etan borrowed my turtle Samlet, who was about the size of a half dollar. He stayed up nights turning the lights in his room on every once and a while, hoping to catch Samlet out of his shell. I took Samlet back before Etan decided from frustration to dissect. I'd have had him arrested for breaking and entering.

Never mind that more often than not we made no sense at all. Sometimes no sense is the only sense that can be realized, sometimes nonsense is the best sense to make.

When John was in class, which was no more than three days out of five per week, he'd tell me tales of auto dealership theft and high speed pursuit when the teacher was preoccupied. And before I knew John I thought he was a timid, average guy with tired, dark brown hair who might

occasionally step out of his inhibitions, rarely risking exposing himself to others, and who always obeyed all posted speed limits and signs. I'd have never imagined his extracurricular activities or his feigned docility if he hadn't been so willing to let me in on his exploits. He was for me a kind of hero, a pseudo-type hero, a noncharacature particularly good at one thing. The only problem is that car theft is illegal, or else he would have found his calling.

In a world where rules come before the needs of people, those rules are bound to be broken. John just needed a little excitement, a release. Too bad it had to be with things which weren't his. But I guess it HAD to be with things which weren't his. I admire his unrivaled, remarkable originality. I know no other person so bold as to risk their freedom to be free.

Actually, creative writing was the only class in which individuality and imagination were acknowledged at all. There I awakened a sleeping aspect within myself that I never before would have even supposed existed, an ability to appreciate words and honesty. Every other place was just a filibuster until graduation and a waste of heartbeats invaluable.

There, we were sounding ourselves to see whomeach of us might be, there an endless journey to capture my self began, for the journey is a constant doing, a process, continuous. Discovery of an inner voice was the goal, not consumption and temporary retention of sterile knowledge. There's more to life than measuring moles. They're such a pain to catch anyway.

Becca wrote a poem for a collection to represent the best of the class, an anthology called A Crack In The Glass:

This is the sound of a whisper a shy seductive whisper it's close directly in your ear soft, low, warm it's a whisper from a special friend hearing this sends chills shooting down your back you hear and feel his breath on the inside of your ear it's invigorating exciting what the whisperer says is not important it's the effect.3

I'll never see Rebecca again and will always wonder if she wrote about me. I was too reserved back then when I could have asked. Now I really don't want to know, I like the feeling of the overlooked effects on others she reveals of the whisperer and the mystique surrounding that person's identity.

And it was just so long ago that I'd rather chew on speculation, realizing there's an unspannable distance between presently and those remote remember whens. I'm realizing that the past is the past.

Funny how people go their own separate ways like a country road forking, each compelled by their own needs to part but, like frozen ripples, leave a piece of themselves behind to remain indelibly in memory.

People leave strange, permanent whispers in their wake.

It's a tart, bittersweet kind of painful absence when close friendship becomes only reminiscent recollection, like having an appendage cut off and knowing it's missing while remembering when it wasn't. The whispers I hear sometimes seem so close and the source so distant, missing.

The parting has to do with separate fates, determined individually, sometimes spontaneously, yet undeniable and irrefutable. Different destinations via separate roads. Occasionally someone travels parallel to my own coarse but too quickly they depart to ramble off, maybe to temporarily share a common course with another. My line seems straight while all others meandering, which probably is an illusion.

So many intersections I have shared way behind, but because no one has a perfectly parallel fate with anyone else, memory becomes precious, memory of friendships long and short and eventually destined to diverge, friendships always mortal.

I'm not sure I'd know Becca if I met her again at some future intersection when apparently the only constants in life are change and an awareness of self if one chooses to be brave. That courageous self awareness is the realization that I'll always be evolving as the ground rises and falls underfoot, as strangers become friends and friends disappear like strangers, as other fateful paths diverge and converge with my own.

Seldom is level ground ever lasting, the constancy of inconstancy, the permanence of impermanence ironically obvious.

Who would she be if I did bump into her? Sure she'd be herself just as I am still myself, but she'd be different as well. I'm different.

Maybe there's just more rings of growth around the heartwood which once was all we were, when we were only saplings.

Would she even remember me if our separate roads did converge in that always surprising landscape of the land called Fate?

I wonder all this as I drive alone, the way I've always seemed, as I drive at night, the way things seem now, obscure. I'm going south on a highway through a land called the Bronx on a highway that coincidentally resembles the symbolic road I travel in that locationless land of Fate. This highway doesn't lead anywhere into the past but the symbolic road it resembles does, that road which is an abstract, linear representation of where my life is, is going, and where I have been.

Memory and extrapolation transfer me to that land of destiny and that abstract road which hints at my future and does indeed lead back to Becca's. It's a road that is one way, with memory as the rear view mirror and expectation the road map. Memories are impressions of the miles gone by, the path is windy, with always something around the next bend, the horizon is lost, the map is one of intuition.

The past is the past and it cannot be relived, it can only be remembered. We hold citizenship in both domains, the substantial world around us that we can touch and the abstract world of metaphor which represents similarities concerning where we've been, who we've met, where we are, and where we're going.

I drive following a train of warning, red lights and I drive pursued by a train of bright white lights, tail lights red, headlights white. Darkness dominates all else on a well beaten path of potholed, industrial

age, ecologically callous, concrete malaise that is embodied by this highway as the sun sets in the land of the Bronx.

The sun has set in the land of Fate as well and I an not sure at the moment who I am anymore, what I want, or where my life is going. The sun will rise again though and I will be better able to find my bearings.

Someday I'll mend these broken wings. Time heals that which can be broken, like hearts and wings. And someday I'll find out if others too lose themselves inside themselves sometimes, like needing to drive a runaway bus but unable to get out of the back seat, restraints internal and external binding. Yet if I'm not inside myself where else can I be?

I'm in a back seat somewhere within me, all the while knowing no one is driving and that no one else is more qualified to take the wheel.

Metaphorically speaking, I often believe a person to be more than one simple unit, more than one perspective, more like a consensus of individual parts subdivided yet united. What's called the heart, the soul, the body, the many parts of the mind, all form a committee constantly vying for their own fulfillments, the rational mind being the sometimes unlistened to chairman.

There also are internal mirrors, or how else can I sense my dislocation? My mind's eye is that ability to delve within me while my external eyes are limited to seeing the world around me, which is just as formidable a task.

So I drive my car actually on two roads, a road taking me to my destination tonight and a road taking me to my destiny. Even when I'm

nowhere near a concrete or asphalt, physical road, as sure as time is a marching, heedless juggernaut I'm on that metaphorical road alone, fulfilling my fate whether it be flexible or immutable.

It's a fate my own, and in that sense we all live our lives alone, when it comes to our fortunes, on roads of destiny where we each are the sole traveler, on roads that though chosen are so sharp and unpredictable that foresight is barely possible. But we're all in this together, too.

In the land of Fate one never reaches a summit to take in the view ahead. To find out where I am within me I must know who I am so I can recognize myself. Who am I truly? One of the most amazing things is that when we look inside ourselves we find we're not there, concretely there, for we are possibility, incarnate. Still, who am I, biologically, deliberately, historically, collectively?

True, I'm the part of me that kicks my leg when my knee is hit with a rubber mallet, every so often I live just as involuntary, on a cruise control of reflexive response.

Casey always hated cruise control.

Still, I am and am searching for the part of me that is my awareness and yet I am me. Interesting. Such dichotomy! I know we lock ourselves deep within, imprisoning true identity to instead live automatically. We give up responsibility and surrender cognizance, choosing to take a back seat, choosing to pretend innocence. Knowing so helps in my attempts to cope with what I can't avoid and helps in preventing me from causing self inflicted wounds.

There are many deep circuits of habit, resembling gullies entrenched in the mind. And with thoughts flowing as water does, it is too tempting to take the easiest, least resistive, most traveled course. One should not live one's life on anything resembling a highway, highways lead to an identity amnesia, highways lead to conformity and mainstream stagnancy.

Fate tends to favor individuality, those who demand to be on highways forever never find what was once meant for them and only for them. They find consensus and a generic destiny. It's not just a coincidence that traffic jams occur more frequently on the broad, beaten, crowded paths that lead to nothing but lives of potentials ignored and anonymity.

I intend my whole journey to be much more intimate, deliberately living the moment to moment physical reality that determines moment to moment my abstract representations used to understand that reality. I'd rather traverse the back woods and beat my own path, a life intentional, discovering the world without the distraction and distortion caused by surrounding crowds, discovering and making my destiny without frâil, narrow minded fishmongers trying to convince or force me to rejoin the herd and accept a fate not suited to a even a fish. The fishmongers would sell me to be devoured by an insatiable mass of personal foreignness happily.

I prefer to be sharp, frosty, crisp, aware of awareness and hopefully aware of unawareness so I can snap out of reflexive habits. Individuals die in crowds. Better to be on the front lines of experience, on one's own, true, private path, and not lost in a sleep walking, stagnant mass,

which is akin to hiding under a rock like some reptile afraid of the light. Conformity is a surrendering of rationality to knee jerk reactions, it is a denial of one's inherent possibilities.

Which should dominate the natural coexistence of all the metaphorical parts of the self, the primitive reptile that sneaks around on reflex in the dark and who is the member of the committee intent on becoming all powerfully dominant, or the more apt to reflection primate mind that is best suited to lead the committee because it is fair, balanced, and knows all parts of the person serve a purpose? These are interesting questions.

The universe created human being in installments, adding components one by one, all controlled by the others, all independent, a kind of paradoxical synergy.

Is the soul the spark that fuels our existence? Is the body the soul's house, its anchoring point? Perhaps the soul is not in this world permanently, it is peeking, balanced temporarily, maybe even broken up for a while into subjective parts. When the body goes so does the soul and the peephole, and we maybe even become whole. Are these conditions and speculations insoluble? Even necessary?

I'd rather be warm blooded and open minded while knowing evolution has endowed our skulls with an almost out of date for thought reptilian foundation that takes care of our involuntary necessities, that made

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sure we survived infancy but if allowed to, would take care of awareness like murder taking care of life.

One can choose to live with that reflexive, involuntary reptile mind dominating, which by its very own limitations leads to an involuntary existence, or one can decide that shutting out one's potential, living on highways sleepwalking with the crowds, cognizant of nothing, is the greatest insult.

Most of the time I am a point, aware, other times I'm that dull, scaly, conditioned collection of inherent and taught responses that sneaks in and takes over in a temporary coup d'etat when the higher mind is overwhelmed and taken off line. Sometimes it is as though I have awakened to find myself playing a role, as though I've become a characature of myself, as though I've been an actor awakened in a play wherein the character portrayed had bullied and submerged the actor's identity.

I recover by caring, feeling, and remembering that reflex is not my desire.

I don't know, it's all so mysterious and comical. Metaphorically speaking as I have done, one can never know oneself as another. There is that be reptilian vs. be mammalian struggle within me often, a struggle to be me and not just a reaction. And that pursuing scaliness is as close to that anotherness as one can get, for one will always be oneself, responsible, but can almost lose oneself, almost. I decide that we always know where we are. I decide not to insult myself by superimposing an inflexible model upon myself. I decide not to treat myself as an object, not to be personally condescending.

I don't want to be a slave to those reptilian types of reactions without reasons though I must react. I'd rather be spontaneous and a point aware. I don't desire to be a prisoner to that type of personal anonymity reflex brings. I don't want to lock myself away in a secret cell, bind myself to the back seat, resign as chairman to awareness though there are parts to my total self that may always be secret and mysterious. For example: I have no idea where my dreams come from yet I know they come from me or I wouldn't remember them.

To know oneself means not to live outside of who one truly is by sending that more recent, rational part into scaly, reflexive exile.

I know myself by doing, by having knowledge. I do not want to be programmed to pretend living, I do not want to be an automaton.

There's automatic transmission in my car, automatic internal engine regulation, and automatically assisted power steering that practically doesn't need me to steer at all. These are some precedents pointing towards an eventual automatic existence if we're not careful. There's enough automatic in my life without me becoming automatic too.

If everything does become automatic, we'll then have automatic emotions via intravenous hormone control, automatic gratification via software generated stimulus wired to our senses, all leading to automatic anonymity by choice because we all were too scared to take the wheel, to lead the committee, to not play a role but be ourselves instead of hiding on the crowded highways.

We would live not knowing the difference, in a world all fed the same artificial illusions, grazing on one huge highway, motionless, eyes

closed, true fates denied, everyone submerged into convenient, scaly existence.

I choose not to live a life of an ultimate convenience leading to an existence without waiting for the ripening of the fulfillment of goals, leading to an existence impatient, without any goal but to conform, to be eternally soothed, and that means to sleep always. Patience is as inherent to awareness as spontaneity, the reptile mind is the child which cried in the dark no matter how many "Just wait one minute"s were presented to it. Acid. I'm not a child anymore.

I'd rather diligently plow through barriers, a life of self service inevitably, spurning the silver platter containing the chalice of conformity that when drunk from eradicates all awareness and any sense of individuality.

Interesting that within ourselves is the ability to live cognizant or die by reflexive living. It's our choice, a fascinating choice which tests one's true mettle.

They say use this and you will feel free, consume this and you will look wonderful, wear this and you will not recognize the new you. They teach that one is always missing something essential, which is true, but what they offer as essential is essentially worthless.

What is essential and missing is experience, not material, silver platter displayed, self dislocating items. We know ourselves by living. We have basic, substantive, purposeful needs but they have nothing to do with one's external identity. Everything offered has to do with image, feeling free is not being free, looking wonderful is not feeling wonderful,

and packaging oneself to play an anonymous role is not growth, it is nothing new.

Experiencing is what the living are for, for experience is doing, learning, and to learn means to be exposed to something one at first is unaware of, it is not predictable, reflexive stagnancy. One can only be reflexive if the situation matches the preprogrammed gully in the mind.

Precedents do indeed abound, fine lines between benefit and enshacklement which when inspected are not lines but gorges.

It is a brave thing to be a person, an individual, to live deliberately, to maintain control of all those contesting, necessary, inner parts, to take that wheel and steer, crash the bus, leave it on the highway and take off to find one's own true path in the surrounding countryside. It is a brave thing to lead a warm blooded life, without giving in to the ease and abyss of involuntary, scaly living that destroys the self so quickly.

And metaphor takes me to such strange places.

I like to wonder when I have the time to. I speculate on whether a coma victim is really just substance, the soul having been jarred Mose and lost, the window shut, or if the person has become infatuated with their own imperceptibility, too comfortable to rejoin the world, having always pursued such a state and content to be scaly, unstimulated. We cannot grow without stimulation, comfort kills. Many do envy, I must say, the coma victim's insulation, The same many who would rather surrender awareness, preferring to be snuffed out themselves if only they were so

lucky, forgetting that hope is to know that the best is still to come, that anything can happen, that the road is windy and what's ahead is anyone's guess, that positive intent has to matter because everything matters.

I wonder just how many of the seemingly awake simply because they are vertical are just as comatosed as the horizontal, life support system attached, hospital unfortunates.

I wonder why I think so much and can't forget some people like Becca as the tiny details of other experiences disappear all the while, slipping through my fingers like sand. I reel myself in from meditation and remember I'm driving my car to pick up Casey who thinks I drive like an ant and whom I haven't seen in months. It's a lot of line to recollect.

I belong to the train of lights just like an insignificant star in a sky of stars, an unavoidable sensation of being made miniscule whenever on a highway. But in this world highways cannot be avoided sometimes, like on decently long trips. It doesn't mean I have to like it.

There's so much more room to think at night that I could expand until bursting if not careful, I could go so far as to not be able to retrace my steps, unable to follow the safety string tied around my waist because I ran it off the spool. Such overreaching is the opposite of brain dead existence, if taken to too far of an extreme one might not be able to find reality and then get lost in metaphor. Maybe that's insanity.

Better to use as a reference point an approximate center of those extremes of stagnancy and unbounded symbolism, a place where stagnancy ends to become a zone of momentary rest and a place where possibility

begins, a place to wind that string around for safety's sake. Though the center is not where I want to be all the time or even a little of the time, it anchors me so I don't fly off into that imagination insanity totally. I can then take insanity in forays.

I enjoy swinging from my safety line like a child on a old tire tied to an old, sturdy tree. My safety line is a weave of common sense and curiosity. It's not easy but then again it is not hard to get lost in one's own inner landscape, that convoluted, hilly, mysterious landscape. Especially since there is so much room and so much to be discovered.

Becca wrote of whispers.

Whispers abound, from within me, from outside me, whispers about life which I cannot ignore, whispers about myself which I often cannot fully understand, whispers of warning, of conscience, whispers which inspire, whispers of celebration, whispers of the heart's needs.

I've been hearing a soft rumor from within lately that all is not well, that I am secretly a troubled individual. I've heard that the trouble is that I can't seem to find anyone around anymore with anything similar within themselves when compared to what I know to be me, not any tiny semblance at all, which points out the type of company I've been keeping.

Who isn't secretly troubled to some extent?

"When all else fails, lower your standards." Denny used to say before
he went back to Etheopia. I told him he would end up digging himself
to China with that rule because it sounded so pessimistic. But likewise,
I have several times folded in upon myself from stubbornness, armadilloed

with an all or none approach.

One must bend in the storm or break, one must indeed lower one's standards but only when all else has definitely, positively failed.

That kind of stubborn introversion is not healthy, the creases have left emotional and spiritual scars. I'm lucky in the sense that time diminishes everything eventually. Remembrances become weather beaten, scars fade.

Internal friction drives this individual, a pendular movement from one extreme to another, from thoughtful speculation to daring exploration. This friction is a part of living, while trying not to go too far too soon.

An antagonism between many opposing, grinding desires and fears rages within. It keeps my blood warm. If all is so perfect that within is always as calm as water in a cave, one is even worse than secretly troubled. One might find oneself under a rock in that cave.

Reptiles under rocks, the vertical but asleep, the highway decided, the herded, are all cold blooded, so sedate is their most noticeable characteristic.

I wrote a poem in that anthology, it was right under Becca's:

Route 145

She'd lain for hours
On the green, August grass along the highway
Her leg out of reach
But within sight
Pale and lifeless under the Erin's melody
sign.

Spelunking

At 4 a.m., his session over Robby went outside hoping That he could get breakfast down the road.

As he went to his car He saw her in the gray light of early morning Near the Erin's Melody sign.

Robby sent someone for help While he tried to save her To stop the bleeding, To keep her warm.

Though she couldn't feel anything Or hear anything, He talked to her and held her hand.

Spectators gathered out of nowhere In pajamas and robes Watching her die, Helpless and fascinated.

They had to pry his grip From her limp hand As she was taken away. He couldn't talk or stand All he did was stare.

They left him at the bar, shaking. When it closed he got in his car Next to the spot where she'd laid. Ignoring the blood soaked grass, No one saw where he went.

The next morning I'd seen him talking with the state police
Who'd found the boyfriend with the bloodied bumper.

I'd heard, and asked him
If he was all right when he came over.

Politely he said yeah.
But I knew he'd never be the same.

Would you?

Now when I read it, I can see how bothered and how much of a gory mood I was in during high school. I am glad for being and still being restless within.

Whispers and severed legs are quite a juxtaposition of concerns.

I change lanes, passing the car in front of me that is constantly braking for no reason because I know the driver in the little white import is a lunatic. Maybe the driver is my old chemistry teacher Mrs. O'Brady who has crawled out from under a rock somewheres. Then I change back into the right lane, with the lunatic now behind me, because the outside lane is for suicides. I don't look to see the driver because I have enough lunatics in my life and enough of a reptile problem.

Magically, I have changed the lights of the lunatic's car behind me from red to white, it's all relative. Darkness is all else outside of this train of red I follow and train of white I lead because traveling on highways, crowded in a crowd, makes everything dim. The time is also 1:30 a.m. I must remember.

I better understand and appreciate the symbols of my poem today, the metaphorical content. The bleeding victim is myself, an embodiment of feelings of immobility and the violation of a right to choose direction, afreedom stolen. She can't move and neither could I back then, highway victim that I was. Yet her death was actual too. Now I can move slightly, slowly, and am becoming more mobile patiently. And freedom is a real struggle. The blood in the grass from her wound is from the fire within, there is so much youthful angst that no tourniquet can stem the flow. Her blood is from a bleeding, needing heart undammed—her heart, my heart.

Recently I've been just feeling simply damned, limited by walls in a labyrinth not of my making, making headway slowly. At least I'm not

laying on the ground anymore.

The cause of the whole terrible incident is an uncontrollable passion leading to collision, the virility of youth against a world of hard, old, established, damaging structure. I'm different now, more complex. Once I was a sapling leaning from the gales faced by the young, now I've a better base of support and I know I don't deserve to cast myself and be cast as a victim, which is inspiring. I am as free as I believe I can be. The sapling is still within and is who I centrally am. I change with the seasons by growing around that core, in growth rings from experience.

There's a speed limit to change, to seasons changing. There's a speed limit on the land of Fate's roads that has nothing to do with how fast one drives one's car. Not directly anyway. Tonight, for instance, I'm driving to a destination, but even if I were just sitting by this roadside night and day, watching the modern world choke itself day and night, I'd still be traveling towards my destination on a road representing my personal journey through that horizonless land.

Tonight I know to where I'm driving on the road before me yet I don't know where I'm heading on that personal voyage. I don't think I'd believe it if someone told me honestly where that would be. As though someone else might know! There is just no telling. The destination cannot be discovered without traveling the whole distance.

Acknowledgment of both thoroughfares is a necessary part of existence, for the roads of Fate are merely a representation of one's experience but condensed for better understanding.

Tonight, for instance, I can't recall what color Becca's eyes definitely are. The memories of people met at past intersections are approximations, facsimiles slowly revealing their limited ability to accurately reproduce reality. I have decided that her eyes were hazel though I don't know positively if her eyes are hazel.

I have recreated the details of a fading past that keeps condensing itself by dropping those little details first, condensing itself because there's only so much room on the shelf.

It hurts to lose those tiny particulars. The jigsaw puzzle is slowly losing its original pieces because the table is getting smaller, and eventually the puzzle becomes a totally different puzzle if enough pieces are substituted for what pieces become lost.

Perspectives, memories, and attitudes change along with the poems we write and the whispers we hear. My present unfortunately changes slowly. What's past doesn't change at all, memory either fades away from sharp images and emotions to just vague, detailess emotions and images. Or memory fades totally and is reinvented, replaced by a slightly altered facsimile based on personal taste.

The slowness of change in my life is because someone has stolen the change missing in my life, the changes I need to improve my life.

Just pressing down on the gas pedal is not going to do the job, that is superficial change for temporary fulfillment. I need conditions to change, conditions of my external surroundings which I wish I had so much more control of and conditions of my internal attitudes which I alone must ultimately answer for. There is plenty of grade A quality change

in the world, enough to fill all the empty ones who need.

There are plenty of people speeding around like suicides, confused, thinking that miles per hour and true change in one's life are synonymous, unable to see that all change begins by changing personally.

There is plenty of real change through increased options and personal growth in favorable surroundings, except some have more than others, hoarding, repressing, afraid to live as equals with everyone because their philosophy has always been to step on whoever is between themselves and the insulating power to suppress others that they crave. They are indeed scaly.

I was always told that everyone gets the same. I was always told that there is enough to attempt to greedily hoard because a small few deserve more than the many, that those who lack are poor as punishment for slothfulness and should also leave the country if they complain about their supposedly deserved poverty.

I was always lied to.

Too many, which for me is more than zero, suffer from a famine not just of food but a ravaging want, a poverty of possibilities due to a lack of change in their lives.

Yet we endure to hope.

Where am I going and who am I?

Yet I endure to not only hope but to see. I am reminded that I am what I do, I am defined by my actions, that I'll always want to know who I am and that I'll only know that by what I do.

I'm driving tonight to pick up Casey, whose life woccasionally

intertwines my own. Our roads repeatedly converge to diverge. She comes and goes. Why does one's life seem like the straight line and all other's unexpectedly merging and diverging, tangential zigzags?

"It's all relative." someone once reminded me when I had forgotten for so long. Perspective means everything, everything means everything too, but so does perspective. It's the lens of the camera, the window for what all that we are will be expose to. And perspective is so much a contingent of attitude. Look up to a cerulean sky and the spirit will soar at the sky's infinity, grovel in the materialistic muck and the spirit is soiled, standards lowered, personal armies of will surrendered to a rabble of faceless despair.

I spend too much time looking down, burdened, frequently feeling damned, as though walking with ankle and wrist weights in that mud. For this world is a world of materialistic mud making. I walk expecting to fall at any moment as the mud gets deeper and the weights heavier, as I sink while trying to hold up my standard as high as I can. Yet it sinks with me.

The trick is to avoid the quagmire created by the insecurity of a lack of options. Insecurity with prolonged exposure becomes the status quo, invisible, assumed. Such burdensome horrors become imperceptible with frequency, the lens becoming cloudy as a means of defense to prevent as best as possible any more damage to the spirit. And with sight blurred, hazards become invisible as well and we find ourselves in the mire.

Insecurity makes the brightness of a cerulean sky dull, lowers

expectations like a lead chain wrapped around a swimmer, and people who can no longer see the world as it is around them are detached, numb.

Numb people create horrors due to their lack of feeling. They tend to always use a sledgehammer when a feather would have sufficed, they cannot consider what they can not sense so they are inconsiderate. They are scaly as well, for inconsideration is cold blooded and coldness causes numbness.

Soldiers are numb.

Murderers are numb.

Death is numb.

Scaly existence is numb.

Insecurity due to the lack of the ability to change one's possibilities and the horrors imagined which are instigated from such circumstances creates numb people and numb people cannot help but create such circumstances. Insecurity creates numb people who are numb as defense and numb people create horror. Numb people are horrible.

Insecurity is an emotional cell imprisoning personal growth, accomplishment, and ambition. Insecurity is both a physical oppression and a sensual confinement as everywhere monsters are suspected. So we walk around with our eyes and more closed out of fear.

A person can be made to feel so numb from the horrors of insecurity so as to also identify with the lack of awareness and lack of reaction of a comatosed hospital patient, much like the highway decided. They become frozen, horrified too greatly. They become numb, hiding within themselves, after detaching their senses, in shells waiting for

a better day, for circumstances to change. One must incite that change, not wait to be served some lies on a silver platter.

Fish illustrate the effects of confinement, for fish will not develop to their natural size if kept in an aquarium, a transparent cage, unable to move more than a few inches in a few gallons of water. Insecurity is just as stunting because insecurity is a similarly transparent entrapment. Fish must be scared stupid for sure, bumping against walls they cannot see but walls that are there. I have similar walls in my life and they sure cause me to be scared stupid sometimes.

Collectively, we live in one huge society of subordination that rewards nonconsideration and militates against any sense of community. We are told to be fish that must either endure entrapped or be punished and eventually flushed down the toilet. With needs beyond means, the individual is just as confined as any pet, confined in an invisible cage formed by selfish paradigms suppressing concern. Life becomes a small aquarium, problems become solely personal, individuals feel that they don't have a problem, instead they are the problem. The greatest horror is to feel that the whole world regards one as dispensable. One begins to fear that the scant aeration may be turned off, causing one to drown, no longer amusing to ones scaly fellow human beings who could make a difference if they were not thinking so highway decided.

I lower the two front windows of my car because it suddenly hits me that cars are aquariums on wheels. I let the cool night blow my hair around like water caressing coral, and I let the air's chill give me goose bumps.

My goal is to be independent, where I am no longer victim, and to be able to decide for myself who and where I am to be. Speed limits of change of course still and always applying, but I want to find my own velocity to see how much change I can handle along whatever path which might be my future.

I would rather bail out to possibility and risk drowning like a fish jumping from its glass container than to be captive, slowly being stunted and slowly being denied oxygen for sport.

Because too often Welkdrowning for spectators.

The trick is to jump into a bigger tank and eventually into the ocean where there are no walls except the walls one wishes to live with, walls of one's choosing. With the car windows open I have an ocean of air to caress me coolly.

Precedents for independence exist too, I see.

All log jams eventually break.

I am driving south on I-95 to pick up Casey, feeling like weasels are squirming around in my blood as someone I know says occasionally. I am always building myself up and tearing myself down. The wrecking ball is never idle, the bricklayer is always busy, the weasels are often disturbed to riot after each demolition and then settle down with each construction.

It is night time still, 1:35 a.m. to be relatively exact, because nothing is ever exactly exact. It is all relative, I must not forget.

The latest belief demolished this morning is that the world is a nice place to live in. Someone decided to take a vinyl nose protector

off my car while I slept and now my rusty car doesn't look as sporty as I drive around warming the globe and destroying the already scant ozone layer. Now I realize for the world as a whole to improve, individuals must change their concept of what it means to be human, therefore changing how they treat one another.

Several cars pass by at incredible speeds, changing from bright white pursuers into red specters fleeing before me, but that is not the right kind of change and it will do them no good. They are shooting stars and shooting stars don't last, they get removed from their cars dead, by firefighters with giant can openers, like sardines. They are fish confused, fish that swam recklessly thinking they could pretend they were free.

I go my own speed because I have sense and because it is the proper speed for the moment, for my life at the moment, and because I know it is all relative. No matter how fast I drive the change I require must come from somewhere else, not through my car. Those speedsters will never realize the difference, I pessimistically believe. But then again there is always possibility.

Casey told me once that I drive like an ant. I love it. Our perception of speed is slightly different, she likes to be driving or else feels stagnant, which might have rubbed off from her parents who drive separately even if they're going to the same place at the same time and are leaving from the same place at the same time. No, I don't drive like a turtle or something just as slow, I drive like an ant.

Picturing an ant driving makes me smile because an ant can't drive

at all obviously, as though when I'm driving we're not moving I'm going so slow.

The weasels in my blood which were unsettled by this morning's demolitions calm down as my sanity-through-humor returns. I'm building a belief that maybe some place in this great, wide world, perhaps might be or could be made to be hospitable. I'm not done yet but already the weasels have settled in the basement. Laughter too stems their hyperactivity.

I'm part of the winding through darkness train of red tail lights ahead of me. I'm the caboose. Looking behind, I'm the beginning of an endless train of white headlights. I'm the engine. It's all relative. The coal car is manned by a lunatic who keeps swerving back and forth as though warming his/her tires for the Indy 500.

I've been this way before to meet someone falling down slowly out of the sky, to meet Joe when he first came to this country from bloody London. The best time to fall down from the sky seems to be after twelve midnight. I don't know why, but that is when everyone I have ever gone to the airport for arrives.

I was eleven, Ciaran was twelve. We went to the airport with our parents and sisters, half of everyone there either the other half's aunt, uncle, niece, nephew or cousin and whatever else since our fathers are brothers and Joe is their sister's son.

The ride was vague, children naturally, innocently don't know where they're being driven. The atmosphere in the car crackled with anticipation, children always being eager for the new adventure.

Such is growing up that if a child is only driven along the same road, the child will know no other road, no other landmarks. Children are casualties of dependence if dependence is narrow and confining, scant and breadcrumby.

We know.

I cannot remember what car took us there, a detail out of reach, gone, pushed off the shelf, fallen from the puzzle. It was totally dark until arriving outside the airport, a darkness filled with momnying little girls who were being teased in a crowded car by two bored, older brothers.

It was always a rule that your own sisters were worthy of teasing while your girl cousins you didn't tease because they weren't one's sisters and therefore were nice.

The vehicle must have been a station wagon, there were so many of us, and when your parents are remote, little girls with their seemingly complex but pointless, silly, clapping and cat's cradle games are irresistible targets, at least until they get old enough and smart enough to know they can claw, bite and kick as well an any wolverine, and punch as well as any boxer.

At the airport, the bright lights of the surrounding parking lots revealed that planes were not just little, noisy birds up in the sky but large, heavy, whining, popular metal machines who thought they were birds and were constantly hiding behind concrete walls in case anyone found out the truth. Airports are zoos for fake fowl.

Sometimes, along the way to whatever particular terminal we had to go to, the wanna be foul, those metal, complaining machines would pass

overhead via their own special bridges. It was like a safari.

The terminal was an oasis of an even brighter light than the parking lots, with special, speeding buses guarding all approaches. I was almost run over by one except my uncle saved me as I stared at it, like an idiot, wondering if it was going to stop. It didn't.

Inside were floors and walls of off white, air bubble pitted marble and crowds of melancholy people all dressed in raincoats, with matching luggage in piles next to them and a ceiling so high that clouds were blocking any view of it. I will always believe that luggage makes people sad.

Crowded, stainless steel elevators went up and down as though ferrying people to and from St. Peter's pearly gates, rising to disappear into the clouds above or descending only to ascend again so their riders could knock once more at heaven's doors.

I guess reservations were needed.

I remember Ciaran grabbing one of those black handrails of an ascending escalator, the kind of handrail that rises with the stairs. He was pulled up dangling on the outside of the escalator, up to a height of about twenty feet or so off the air bubble pitted marble floor until letting go to land with two slaps of his sneakers upright, smiling and wincing.

I laughed in awe and amazement. No one else noticed, too busy being melancholy in their khaki raincoats with their piled, matching luggage sets, or too busy being paradise eager.

Ciaran probably stunted his growth, at least for a few weeks. Now

he is six foot something. I can see him back then wearing a white wool sweater yet I have no clue what I was wearing.

Memory is unpredictably selective.

I decide I was wearing a cowboy costume; blue shirt of embroidered green cacti; black felt hat and black, dusty boots; silver spurs; brown, worn holsters; tired, dusty brown chaps over even more worn bluejeans; and silver Long Ranger guns that would only shoot bad guys.

We always called the Lone Ranger the Long Ranger for some now funny reason. I guess because to little boys, a grown man and especially one who is a cowboy seems like a pretty larger than life, burly fellow.

I park my car, a maroon, rusting, eleven year old Datsun two seater, in the closest parking space that I can find near the terminal I've got to go to. I'm in the now, I'm feeling good.

Cars. Cars are built to rust or else they wouldn't. Young men are raised to die in war for the meaningless, selfish principles of old men and they shouldn't. Mostly young men that is, because the older generation will let anyone die for their economic and political reasons, except for themselves of course.

So I turn off my car just as deliberately.

When Dr. Heimlich revisited my high school after graduating so long ago, probably an absence of half a century, after discovering the Heimlich maneuver and all, in a speech that lasted for a long time, he had one message. He repeated it over and over. "Don't let the old men send you off to war." he said.

I remember and I won't.

H24. I must now remember that or else I'll never find where I've parked. Without such divisions of parking lots one might have to look for days, and there is no food, water, or entertainment for the interim.

I button up and make sure I have my car keys. You always gotta have those damn car keys I know from experience. That is why there's an extra set hidden outside the car in a turn signal light. I just don't remember which one. I don't know exactly where that key is but I do know it is cold.

Damn baby it's cold out! It is windy from the wind, and bright from the powerful sodium lights overhead. I make sure that the car is all locked up because these days there is no telling. I may come back to find a homeless family inside, squashed into the back and into the two front and only seats. I wouldn't have the heart to throw them out.

Cars of all types and colors pull in and pull out of the spaces around me. They all have one common characteristic, they're not as old and rusty around the edges as mine. Like the rust on my car, under my car, and in my car, airports never sleep. H24. I mustn't forget. Don't let them send you to war, I'll always remember.

Airports are boring places now, the lights just electric, the people just strangers, the planes just pieces of deliberate junk on little wheels that sometimes decide to fall from the sky to die without care for human life. And I'm not wearing the cowboy clothes I used to dream of

I stand now on enough broken dreams and expectations to rival K2.

Romantic and adventurous ideals are just small parts of that rubble, along

with ideas and potentials that couldn't survive the infertility of the soil I'm planted in. And I just hate being planted. I thought with maturity automatically comes mobility, but not yet, it's a struggle. I'm getting closer to unfettering myself, while they still try to clutch desperately, though the function of a family is to eventually dissolve in an orderly fashion, creating independent individuals.

I'm not even wearing cowboy boots or anything cowboyish.

Now I'm wearing white, leather, high top basketball sneakers I've never played basketball in Sneakers that are old and heel worn, and faded bluejeans that are at least three years old but still wearable with the name Ilena written in indelible black marker, a remnant from the past. And I'm wearing a black, wool overcoat, the kind seen worn by longshoremen, the kind worn by Robert Redford in his 1970's movies.

Boy it's cold, the air feels like alcohol perpetually evaporating from my face. I turn up the coat's high collar because some secret government agency with a secret agenda is after me though that agency doesn't have a name other than simply "the company."

One wonders who the stockholders are.

So, I don't look like a cowboy at all, more like a Marlon Brando
On the Waterfront/cut basketball player/Robert Redford Three Days of the
Condor amalgam.

If only Kurt were here strongly today, the man is fading away, still living on but too often taken for granted. If the concept of Kurt was a picture he'd be black and white now, faded, the color gone, the details disappearing.

Parking lots and cars. We're so lucky we took advantage of the death of the dinosaurs and saw how we could use the oil they and theirs turned themselves into to attempt to wipe ourselves out too.

From the parking lot I cross the bus lane while looking up at a starless, black sky. People used to use stars to guide themselves, pursuing lofty, bold ideas and goals that stars inspired in them. Now there are no stars in our lives and look where we've wandered purposely: into a malaise of mind, body, and spirit with zealots vying for a piece of each, aiming for our wallets and the pieces of paper within, those pictures of dead, white, male millionaires called presidents.

I'll have to ask around why the stars have gone, it bothers me.

Quickly I run across the asphalt because a bus driver wants to hit me and score ten points. I think I'm worth more, like fifteen. There are no traffic lights to stop their black exhaust, diesel cloud, reckless racing.

My shoulders are raised and my chin is to my chest as I walk to the Trans_______ terminal. The sign really is incomplete, and the second half is Velcro the name changes so often. I guess there is a new owner unable to decide on the title of the company, or an old owner who is illustrating how flexible she or he would be when selling, so flexible that the new owner can call the airline anything.

I squeeze through a tinted, revolving door in a wall of glass doors. There is always a lot of glass at airports so that there are great action scenes in airport disaster movies. The tail does indeed wag the dog, sometimes.

My shoulders relax and I chin up inside after the door spits me out into the interior warmth while I try to forget that there exists an invisible Frenchman following me, dressed in a marvelous seventeenth century winter fashion of a tawny calfskin overcoat, black pants and boots, and the requisite black, three pointed, white feathered hat.

I misplace him sometimes and I'm reassured to know again that I cannot perceive his obviously invisible presence.

He takes care of himself.

Inside the terminal there is indeed a ceiling, the floors and walls are a solid, shiny gray marble because airport terminals must be made out of the hardest substances possible to impart a feeling of dependability. And there are no escalators. This is a ranch style terminal. I guess access to the afterlife is somewhere else, maybe in a terminal that handles more international type flights.

The people inside who own the planes are always afraid their machines will fall on the terminal and themselves or crash into the terminal and themselves so they too need soothing structure around, hence glass and marble. The customers are nervous and the people who work within the terminal are nervous, but these fears are kept hidden from the planes of course because such information would only undermine their confidence.

Never mind that planes are inanimate objects and I have fear of flying.

But it is a comfort to see that luggage still makes people melancholy and that some still remember the good old days when everyone was required to wear khaki raincoats like their black and white movie idols, even the

children. Raincoat martial law has ended and the few die-hards scattered through the crowd are remnants of those times long ago.

The terminal is sparsely crowded, as opposed to "I can't move anywhere, get me out of here," crowded, with just enough room to move between sad faces and sad groups of faces. It is the typical crowd at any typical airport anywhere, people of all kinds with frowns in common. And luggage is typically piled everywhere, which is typical, whatever typical in general is and whatever a typical airport is as well.

I zigzag through the crowd as though in a gallery of figures that are lifelike but only statues. Some are frozen in circles, wearing gray business suits, some stand frozen looking around expectantly, a little boy is frozen still as he attempts to steal his pig tailed sister's rainbow swirled lollipop. There are frozen people trains of twos, threes, and fours on little wooden dollies strung together, in the midst of being dragged by likewise inert baggage handlers. I'm in a still picture I'm able to walk through.

In a fine example of people seeking information, I join an inert arrangement looking high at a bank of monitors which display in black and white little lies about departures and arrivals.

The flight from Denver hasn't arrived, I'm early, very early. I never thought about ever having to wait for a plane from Denver in my life. Oh well, that's because the road is so windy.

Why am I so early? Because I'd always rather be early and bored than late and anxious. Anyway, I've brought along something to keep me busy, my imagination, and a mammal that I've borrowed. The computer

screens say Gate 10 so I'll go to find Gate 10.

What is this, a horse race?

I leave the information seeking arrangement. It was a good arrangement, with realistic enough looking people sculpted to scale and all.

Because I always feel more alive than the people around me. I feel like a fast forward person in a slow motion world as I cut back and forth through the crowd like a runningback through the other team's secondary.

I'm here picking up Casey because her parents are having a huge party at their house celebrating something. I've forgotten what it was they had told me. They even offered me use of either of their cars but I'm not about to drive a car that costs more than three years pay.

Plus they put those annoying, little, scented green trees on their rear view mirrors and I hate those things. Ciaran had one in his old Torino. I tasted it for some strange reason, Vanillaroma, and my tongue turned orange and went numb for a whole day. Why would I do such a thing?

I flip down the collar of my coat and unfasten the top buttons. With my hands in my pockets I decide to get lost, sort of. I'll browse from one overpriced souvenir shop to the next because I've somehow consultation anyway.

Someone should have thought of this a long time ago, an airport mini-mall network. Can't find that perfect present in Seatle? Fly to L.A., they have a great airport mall. I'll find Gate 10 later, when I've pretended long enough that I can afford anything of all the worthless anythings these stores are selling.

Everything is duty free though. Does that mean if I buy an American flag at a duty free shop that I'm exempt from being drafted if there was a draft, in a world where duty is considered dying for the elite when real duty is dissent by personal conviction?

I kill an hour paging through magazines at many stores while counter clerks stare through glass storefront windows at people staring through those very same windows at those same clerks from the outside. The counter clerks wonder when exactly they had come to work it has been so boring, the people are wondering whether or not if they bought that expensive item they would feel free. Real freedom is too much of a chore they complain.

I pass a cafe with a pilot and a stewardess sitting down to mild, decaffeinated coffee and lies about being single. He is oriental and she is blonde, the coffee is mild and decaffeinated because I don't like to drink caffeine or rich coffee.

It is so weird seeing someone like a pilot or stewardess flirting at an airport, so undermining, sort of like going to the Vatican to find the Pope beating up a dog with a stick or beating up a nun with a rubber hose or teaching the alter boys dirty words.

One likes to believe that one's life and soul are in the hands of people singularly dedicated, flawless, foibless, able to handle any situation without little things like love, hate, desire, and compulsion getting in the way. Of course, my soul is in my own hands, my life is mine to do with as I please, but still, one could imagine such beliefs.

Faith in people like Popes and pilots is supposed to, by their pious

example, help calm the aerophobic and the suspicious, like me. I suspect the Pope is human and that getting on a plane is a needless risk. Now I'll never fly because I realize that the Pope may indeed secretly have a dog and a stick, not to mention codles of nuns and alter boys on hand. But that's just me.

From the cafe, I decide to look around for lost, little children; females about twenty-five, tall, attractive, available. I'm kidding myself for a while.

Being in a crowd helps in my self deception, there are so many similarly but differently attractive women one sees.

They say beauty tames the savage beast, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and that beauty is only skin deep. I need to be tamed at the moment, realizing that beauty especially is relative and isn't just skin deep. Beauty is more than appearance, as though beauty is only the outside of a person and inside isn't beauty, and is therefore ugly. Not so. Beauty is imperfection and beauty is when she says something from within so poetic, so original, so new to me that it is priceless.

I waste some more time at one of those rotating luggage pickup areas where everyone crowds around trying to grab their luggage, or any luggage, or absolutely anything at all with the one arm they can squeeze out from the crowd. Then they must pull the suitcase back into the crowd and through the crowd. It looks like there are no rules at all and because luggage has that tendency to get lost when put on the wrong plane and sent to the wrong hemisphere, the impatient, recently disembarked, and agitated simply grab for anything with a handle passing on the luggage

carousel, satisfied they have something at all to call luggage even if it belongs to someone else.

There is probably an international trade in lost luggage to insure that each airport worldwide eventually gets a chance to exhibit misplaced baggage from around the globe in these rotating luggage galleries.

It's great when two people, especially two jet lagged, corporate, androgynous types grab for the same suitcase, because corporate types all buy black suitcases.

It's part of the uniform to conform.

I lose interest and wander away.

There are other black and white computer displays all over the place, placed high up like bar room televisions. If I had brought my remote control from home I wonder whether I could change the channel to get the schedule of departures and arrivals at other terminals at other airports.

I see that the flight from Denver is on time, about to land in a short while, which means it will probably end up circling for days or at least for a longer short while. So I find a waiting area and stare at the flight schedule displays though I'm going to get a crick in my neck since the monitors are so high. I'm also going to get a numb ass because the chairs are so hard.

The waiting area is like a mini movie theater and I'm in the front row of three rows, in the last seat on the left. The seats are armless and orange, bolted to each other and bolted to the gray marble floor. Talk about inflexibility. Even the letter "L" would find these seats uncomfortable.

The rest of my row consists of old, flemmy, wrinkled men returning

or going to Florida, because Florida is actually a national reserve for people over fifty-five. No one is allowed to know old people, an older generation might impart wisdom to the younger from their experiences, setting precedents, and that is against the law.

I've never seen so much plaid or so many designs of plaid, so many abstract, clashing designs and so many pairs of limp, black socks. All the old men wear white old men's hats and all have the first name Murray. Most pretend to sleep so their wives, who are all babbling together, don't talk to them. And they all sleep because they've decided to retire from life to watch from the sidelines.

Oh to be old, unable to match one's clothes, and chained by choice to a crabby, whining, growling spouse that sends one's blood pressure through the roof just by nagging. Not me.

I'm in the mood to rate women of all ages who pass by within my line of sight. The best age is of course twenty-five with a high paying job and an appearance not perfect but magnetic. Twenty-five is a totally random standard but this diversion must have rules.

I find perfect women to be boring, so my perfect woman is imperfect. And I've never met a perfect person. Is there perfection anyway? If there is it is likely that that perfection is relative, so basically perfection has to do with what is relatively right for one. But then that is not a universal perfection.

Anyway, slight imperfection is true perfection.

There goes a sixteen year old Polynesian who is a little heavy, or as Greg says "There's a healthy one for you." She is going to be

gorgeous , even by my standards. There goes a forty year old Middle Eastern woman whom I'd give an eight to, there's a thirty five year old red head who gets a six. It's great to be young, bored, and in a sexist mood.

Feeling guilty, I decide to switch my attention to men. Who would I like to steal a wife or girlfriend from?

There's a really old Italian guy with a really old Italian woman.

No. Of course I'm always wrong about nationality and age but I'm being superficial anyway so who cares for accuracy when looking to kill time. There's a younger guy with his kids and mommy's looking good. That's a maybe. And of course I'm just joking with myself.

It's a stupid game so I quit, who am I to judge anyway? After all it's all relative. Greg once responded to that by saying "You mean like brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, and cousins?"

"No." I snapped back quickly. He was being intentionally obnoxious again.

There's a movement in my inner coat pocket, then a little pink and whiskered nose sticks itself out , smelling around curiously. This is the borrowed pet that was till now dormant. It's named Evan, Angus, or Tye, a bloody Scottish, all black ferret that I call by three names depending on nothing. Actually I don't know if there are Scottish ferrets but who cares.

I pull him out of the pocket, the one that connects to the inner pocket.

I ripped out the separation. He's got to have air after all, I will not partake of unnecessary drownings, I have a heart. He has as much of a right to live as me. Or it has got as much of a right

to live as me. Ferrets don't seem to have discernible genitalia, but I'm not admitting I've looked.

The ferret isn't mine, Angus is another's and I really haven't ripped out the pocket division, he has. When he's bad I sometimes call him Tye, so I called him Tye after he did that. If he poops in there again I'll permanently call him Tye. It looks like trail mix cereal but it is still poop to me.

I sometimes call him Euan when he is hungry, or is it Angus? I need a system.

This is the plan: keep the poop of ferrets and feed it to guinea pigs; take the poop of the guinea pigs and feed it to fish; take the poop of the fish and feed it to... I could go on but I won't, it is making me sick. It's a secret plan I'll reveal when totally complete and totally, completely sickening.

A short, white, greasy kid with slicked back, dark hair, wearing a luggage attendant's red uniform and pushing a cart of maroon luggage, glances at me and Angus as he wheels by. He's the kind of person who walks into telephone poles because he's so busy picking his nose. He crashes into another cart of blue luggage.

"See what you're bloodywell doing ye eedgit!!!" I tell Tye, adding, "That's not a Scottish accent, that's an Irish accent!" Someone once told me that I sound like a pirate when attempting either accent.

"Laddie, that's not a bloody Irish accent, you're a bloody pirate!"

I tell the ferret, letting his whiskers tickle my nose. I turn to find
a Spanish retiree staring at us as though we're weird. Of course we are.

"Tasmanian Devil" I explain, holding Euan closer to the nosy, old guy, "Once bit my mailman but he only limps now." The plaided geezer jumps back while trying not to lose his indignant expression. His wife stops her babbling with whomever and taps him on the shoulder to get his attention. He instantly nods off.

This reminds me that I'm amazed that sometimes Angus can sleep for somewheres around twenty hours at a stretch and then be awake for another twenty hours.

Maybe he has overlapping fits of narcolepsy followed by overlapping fits of insomnia.

All Angus/Tye/Euan does is eat, poop, and sleep not always one at a time. He looks around then decides to hibernate again, disappearing into the blackness of the left chest pocket of my black wool coat he finds so comfortable.

I'm actually enjoying myself. Often I'm pessimistic purposely and that's not too appropriate. Right now I'm lighter, new circumstances and stimuli tend to do that to me. This is a leap from where I was a few days ago. I can't explain where these dark tendencies come from but I just enjoy being morbid occasionally, like when I visit graveyards.

Now, most people stay away from graveyards till they don't have any say as to where they can and can't be. Then they are hauled out and buried in a cemetery which is really just a junk yard for formaldehyde filled bodies no longer useful and lifeless names no longer applicable.

As though we can cordon off death into a crowed area on the outskirts of experience! After all, who goes to graveyards except people living

in the past, expecting a response some sunny afternoon from their dearly beloved underneath the soft, warm grass as the weekly visit is made. The fact is that I spy on people in graveyards and I see one thing obvious, they can't let go of the dead and therefore cannot acknowledge death or change. One can be reminded of someone anywhere, I think we construct a belief that what is in the ground is that someone, and that because stone lasts so does that person. When that person truly only lasts if our memories do.

I go to graveyards also looking for names interesting and epitaphs poetic. I keep in a little black notebook all the things in cemeteries I find interesting. Like: it's interesting that Mr. Jones has such a large headstone while the guy next to him, Mr. Mack, has just a small stone marker. It's materialism for those who no longer are embodying material, materialism for the inanimate matter they embodied, it's all immaterial now just as it was when they were alive. A world of inequality is a lie.

It's interesting because even though both are dead and nonexistent from this perspective, someone is still making sure that some of the dead have more. The dead are cared for better than the living often enough to wonder why. Part of the reason is because living in the past is not demanding while those now living without do indeed demand. The path of least resistance, repetition, living in the past, ignoring change, leads to present day pain and headstone competitions.

But graveyard exploring is just a hobby, reserved for sunny, lazy, blue sky and yellow dandelion days in June mostly. Yet there is something

beautiful about a cemetery on a colorful autumn day too. One is reminded even more of one's mortality as leaves die and fall to decompose. Formaldehyde only insults that beauty. With formaldehyde we pretend that we can be immortal. Leaves fall from trees but we try not to fall from that crazy, synthetic belief.

I think when I go I'd like to be spread as ashes across the land because death is everywhere, within us every moment of our lives, within us waiting for the body to quit for whatever reason, be it prematurely from disease, an accident, or as scheduled naturally. Death doesn't care why it just takes if the opportunity arises.

I start to nod off with my hands clasped together against my stomach, lulled by the droning around me. I feel the creeping of an irresistible warmth as it rises from my legs to all parts of me. I happily close my eyes.

For just a second I'm asleep. Paranoid, I jump awake in my seat with that feeling that everything around me has been replaced by an exact duplicate, everything but myself. I look around wide eyed with blurry vision. How would one know it such a thing occurred?

What if every time one went to sleep one awoke in a parallel universe, like some huge practical joke no one will ever find out about and only I suspect but will never be able to prove? Then it wouldn't matter.

The plane from Denver has landed I see by means of the monitor. My heart skips a beat while I try to remember who I'm here for. Casey! That's who. She's in this universe too, exactly the way she is in all universes past, which is to say is like everyone, changing.

I will have to face the facts about her, which are many. There's always that feeling when meeting someone for the first time in a while, a feeling of fear. Silly, but I hope she's not too different from the Casey I know, silly because she has and hasn't changed, more has been added, as has happened to me. It's inevitable. I'm not the same person I was when I just nodded off. If neither of us changed then we'd just be tombstones dedicated to stagnancy. But I hope she hasn't changed too much.

Gate 10. So the three of us go to Gate 10, a dock worker with a ferret in his coat, a ferret that's probably ripping a tunnel system through that coat, and an invisible swordsman who'd be very conspicuous if anyone could see him. I forget about my companions and become absorbed in the crowd. I'm at Gate 4 for some strange reason and the crowd seems to be a current I must swim against to reach my goal.

I like to look for terrorists at airports, I decide, little foreigners with foreign clothing, foreign accents, and idealistic intentions to blow themselves up to live with their deity forever.

We were taught a word in forth grade, antidisestablishmentarianism. But we would always say antidisestablishmenterrorism. I happen strongly favor responsible, non-violent disestablishmenterrorism. So I'm definitely against antidisestablishmenterrorism, or more simply, establishment terrorism.

Of course, if like in Orwell's 1984 the state has a false

disestablishmenterrorism to capture people who are truly interested in real disestablishment errorism, it would be called disestablishmentpseudoterrorism.

I'm also against disestablishmentpseudoterrorism, I support freedom and disestablishment errorism. Many things have to be torn down, dismantled, and destroyed to improve our humanity. I'm an antidisestablishmentpseudoterrorist working undercover to reveal ugly truths the sheep turn away from to avoid responsibility. only I know of my designation, I am a faction of one.

So I'm looking for little zenomorphs for no real reason and actually I think I'm the weirdest looking person around, which is great.

I swim against the current of the crowd and reach the Gate 10 area. Gate 10 is just a double door at the end of this huge room that makes up the terminal, which is boring. There should be a spotlight, an emcee, prizes, cute cheerleaders, and a brass band for the ten year old plane made it again!

There's just a double red door with a security guard in blue standing in front. I'm disappointed. I want to go up to the guard and tell him "I'm with the band, man" to get backstage. Wrong situation, same exclusion thing. I want to tell him that I have a bomb and I'm demanding more of a party atmosphere at each gate, except he'd probably just crap all over himself. It actually looks like the same kid who crashed the luggage carts.

There's a line cordoning off the waiting people who I assimilate myself into expertly, there is antidisestablishmentpseudoterrorist work

to be done.

A little, brown complexioned girl in a pink dress, looking all nice, sweet, and cute, kicks me in the right calf because she's in a tantrum. I squeeze myself away as adults around where I was standing start owing too. Thank heaven for little girls.

The red doors are opened by the seventeen year old luggage handler/security guard, gun toting, slick haired punk.

"You're just a punk!" I'd love to say out loud for no reason, but I'm civilized and he's got a gun. I'd love to yell out loud "Hey you pig, you fascist, you oinker! Stop the war you fascist whore!" but I'd be a few decades out of place.

With the doors opened I can see down a long, declining ramp that is dimly lit. I see blue walls, blue carpeting, and a low, blue ceiling. People are walking up towards us like astronauts coming to meet the public after landing, except that they've been replaced by aliens who are going to suck all our brains out through our noses! Well, maybe not. But they don't look like they had a great time in outer space.

They begin to pass through the surrounding, cordoned crowd. Someone complains that they hate the airline, the food, the in-flight movie, their boss, and their mother-in-law to someone else who's not answering because that someone has been emotionally unloading himself all through the flight and that someone else is about to kill that someone because that someone else has had it. Another someone yells that a little girl just kick him. And still they pass by, some waving, some looking strait

ahead, but all are haggard.

The question isn't "Where is Casey?" Essentially the question is "How much damn luggage does she have?" I scan for her.

There she is.

Her brown hair is longer, down past her shoulders, and she's wearing round-lensed, silver mirrored sunglasses, a white ski jacket with many lift tickets on the zipper, high, brown boots, and an expression of "I'm so glad that's over." She doesn't see me as I cut parallel through the crowd to get around the cordon.

Then she stops while other passengers push their way by, looking around.

"Excuse me, aren't you Casey Barrow, the actress?" I ask while trying to disguise my voice. She turns around slowly.

"Ahhhhhh!" she screams, jumping at me, bear hugging me and wrapping her legs around me. I start to sink to the floor under the weight. She lets go and steps back smiling.

"I told you to keep working out." she pseudo-scolds.

"I told you to watch out for those freshman fifteen." I pseudo-answer. Her jaw drops in mock offense. She pushes her luggage at me and starts walking away.

"This is the worst flight I've ever had. A little boy puked all over the seat behind me and I was stuck between two geeks who wouldn't stop asking me anything just to see who could hit on me the most..." she complains, trailing off.

"Well, can I still have your autograph?" I call to her. The fat,

black vinyl suitcase she has given me must be filled with bars of lead.

I catch up.

"Excuse me, this is my first time in Aspen, could you tell me where the snow is?" I inquire. Casey reels around.

"What are you implying?" she grins. We tickle each other with words. I'm implying that she has grown snobby and aloof, which she hasn't done but which I know she suspects that I suspect she has done. I'm teasing.

"I'm not implying anything, it's just that you look so...polar."

I answer.

"Right, polar. I guess I won't be giving you the present I was going to give you." she reciprocates because it's this type of chiding that we both love.

"Bars of lead. You filled your suitcase with bars of lead and you're giving them all to me. Or it's a lead radiation suit." I speculate. She turns and keeps walking.

"How much luggage are we traveling with?" I have to know. I have to know because I'll get a cart and we can crash into people's luggage piles like we're bowling. I'm right on her heels.

"That's it." she thankfully informs, "And you better be careful with that suitcase."

"Well, you better be careful too. When this is opened the room's going to be filled with all your densely packed intimates. This suitcase should say contents under pressure on it." I warn, walking sideways beside her. One arm is already longer than the other.

Casey grins at me.

"I miss your lunacy and your psychosis." she tells me.

"That's a big word. They taught you that in hippie ski college?"

I respond. She nudges me and I bang the stupid suitcase into my leg.

"What do you say we leave this here?" I suggest as we weave our way towards the entrance. I'm so glad that there's no lost luggage to attempt to claim at the baggage carousel because I'd have grabbed anything inevitably and with my bad luck it would have been an unexploded terrorist bomb or maybe even a hiding, midget terrorist stowaway who has swallowed explosives.

Casey is wearing high, suede cowboy boots with her jeans and I'm envious.

"I should be wearing those." I mumble to myself. And a shirt with embroidered green cacti.

"I feel like we should drive away in a Volkswagon van with flowers painted on the sides, Moonflower." I can't help but reveal.

"Ha ha." she replies unimpressed, "Where's your car, Moonflower."

"I'm not Moonflower." I deny, purposely bumping hips with her. Together we squeeze through the revolving door in the same compartment purposely, just like when we were kids. We're spit out into the chill slightly stumbling while laughing.

"You look a little...tired." Casey notes, pushing down on the suitcase. I drop my burden.

"You know, you drive me nuts." I pseudo grumble, grabbing her smotheringly and kissing her stiffly on the lips, as if to say "So take that!" She squirms playfully out of my grasp and whirls away laughing,

as she is prone to do. Our kisses instigate giggles of absurdity, our relationship is not of strictly romantic desire but of fondness forever. She is my sunlight, of the air I breath. She is my soul mate, my accomplice and mistress. We are friends for life because we have been friends almost all our lives. She will always, in some way, be for me and likewise, because we choose to do so. We have been missing one another immensely.

"Where's your car?" she wonders with a sweeping gesture across the whole expanse of acres of cars before us while spinning on her heel.

"Agh. Wait a minute, I think it was H26 or H28, or some even number in the twenties." I struggle to remember. Of course I can't remember exactly, I'm an idiot. Why aren't the signs made more memorable? I could have been parked in a section marked Watermelon, or Inspiration, or Joe. Then I could have asked people "Excuse me, I'm looking for Watermelon," or "Pardon me, I'm trying to find Inspiration," or "Could you tell me where Joe is?" if I got lost. So it takes twenty minutes to find out that I'm parked in H24 because we're using such algebraic symbols.

"Have we forgotten where we live too?" Casey sings out because I guess I do deserve some ribbing.

"Yes." I answer, "And oh, I also forgot to let Casey into the car at the airport." Therefore I put her case in the hatch and open the driver side door, get in, start the car, and ignore her for a couple of minutes. Even though she starts shaking the car, even though she threatens to climb onto the hood and moon me.

"Boy, it's kind of cold out there!" I comment when she gets inside after I let her in before the car tips over or she exposes herself to catch pneumonia.

"Kind of cold in here too." she sheepishly grins.

"Ow!" I wince. Harsh words there.

"Isn't this great?" she insists me.

"The best." I have to admit. Do we always mean what we say? Yes, sometimes. So we drive and catch up on each other because it has been months since we've been face to face. Again our paths have intersected, another collision gently, and the ferret should get a scream.

Part Two

The ferret does get a scream, a loud scream that gets trapped within the car and makes my ears ring subsequently. I threw Angus at Casey with an "Oh my God what is it?" exclamation after making sure her door was locked. There's no telling how some people will react and we wouldn't want to have any accidents, or specifically, any more accidents.

Casey has almost killed me twice while I've only almost almost killed her twice. The difference between almost and almost almost is that almost involves impact.

Now my face is red, mostly on the right side, because when a rodent or whatever family ferrets belong to, mink I suppose, lands on a female in the dark confines of a car, said female tends to slap the offender reflexively, then apologize, then take back the apology, and so on.

If she had a weapon other than her hand she'd definitely have used it. Casey was so startled that she bumped her head on the roof with a metallic thud. A millionth of a second later my face was impacted. She hit me before realizing the exact deliberateness of my actions, which means that when she gets scared she responds by violently lashing out at the closest person within reach. That's not good, especially if you're within reach.

Imagine if someone threw a surprise party for her! They would all be seriously hurt, instantly.

"Why do people almost pee their pants?" I wonder aloud in a

rhetorical tone of voice. Casey holds the now considered cute Tye, the bloody all black Scottish ferret, up to my face.

"BITE HIM!" she commands, "Chew his ear off." At least there are no hard feelings, between Euan and her that is. I'm another story entirely, I'm biteable.

"Ferrets don't eat people." I point out while I drive with a ferret pushed against the side of my face.

"This one does." Casey knows for sure.

"You'd better be careful with him, he may be...contagious" I warn. I was going to say "...ready to pee" but "...contagious" adds more room for possibility, which is extremely important. Anyway, I'm not going to warn her that whenever Angus is picked up he may like to spritz, not after hitting me.

"With what, rabies of something?" she guesses with a grin.
Possibilities. The ferret is perfectly healthy as far as I know.

"Syphilis," I shake my head in sadness, "It is in the early stages but it only gets worse."

"How do you know it has syphilis?" she smirks, whispering "Give him syphilis," while rubbing Angus' nose against my earlobe. This gives me chills from his whiskers tickling.

"He shows all the symptoms." I learnedly answer, "You know."

"NO, I don't know, I'VE never had syphilis. How did IT get syphilis?" she pseudo-wonders, pulling Euan away. He tries to climb on top of her head and succeeds. For a moment Casey looks like Davy Crockett until she pulls him off.

"IT's name isn't it. IT's name is Angus, Euan, or Tye. I happen to like variation and possibilities. And he's Scottish, so don't tell anymore Scottish jokes while he's around, he'll get upset. And he got syphilis when those rouge squirrels he hangs out with took him to a brothel run by a certain chipmunk to be named later." I explain. Never mind that she tells no Scottish jokes and that the chipmunk shall remain anonymous.

It COULD happen. Well, in cartoons anyway.

Casey holds him up in the dim light coming through the windows, looking at his underside.

"He's got no balls or peeps." she tells me matter of factly. I've noticed.

"He left them at home." I laugh, "And I can see you're just another...pervert." Ferret peeper is more precise.

"Yep, that's me." she confirms, threatening my right ear again with Tye's curious nose and tickling whiskers, still trying to coax him into taking a bite out of me. I'm not too surprised.

We both share the tendency to make each other almost slightly feel pain, just superficially enough to get one another's undivided attention. The problem with horsing around is that there's always an accident eventually, causing bruises, scrapes, swollen lips, and worse. Sometimes even Casey gets hurt.

The worst thing is banging heads so badly that both of us almost pass out. I, though, get most of it because Casey has a danger aura around her.

With a strong squeeze I grab Casey's left knee, which makes her squirm

away and take away the ferret she has been trying to attach by it s teeth to my neck.

"Stop!" she demands, knocking my arm away, "Talk about bringing back bad memories." The knee is the weak spot on a woman, the femur is one big funny bone.

"Oh yeah." I recall with a grin. Never attack the female knee when she is driving, especially when she's at best a borderline lunatic driver. I attacked the female knee one time when she was getting out of a parking space. Casey did one of those looking backwards but zooming forwards into the car in front of us things, because of me, supposedly.

It wasn't my fault. I wasn't driving. Of course, if I hadn't been there it wouldn't have happened. Then she drove away from the scene while I hid down in the passenger side in case anyone with a camera was around. Who wants to find their picture hanging in the post office?

It is indeed a bad memory.

"You know, one day we're going to seriously crash from all this horseplay." she predetermines. I wouldn't bet against it.

"I know. I'll be the one driving and the one who gets thrown through the windshield still strapped into my seat while you might scuff your elbow because I'm the one who always ends up with the ugly, stubbed, bleeding toe, the fat, throbbing, numb lip, or the poked, tearing eye." I concede.

"O.K., if that's your offer, it's a deal." she agrees in a high pitched voice while holding the ferret in between us as though it's doing the talking. Angus just hangs there in her grip, content to be a ferret

in an obviously callous-to-ferrets world.

"No, he has to have a deep voice." I insist.

"He hasn't got a peeps, he can't have a deep voice." she sadly reminds me.

We're very near Kay's house, there's a tension rising inversely proportionate to the dwindling distance between ourselves and the festivities.

"I sense a terrible party," she forecasts, "And drunk relatives who don't remember who you are."

"Who I am? What about who you are?" I ask pseudo-confused.

"That's what I mean silly." she tells me in her cute, "Stop teasing me." voice. I can't stop doing that when what we do best is playfully deride one another.

Turning onto Casey's street, cars line both sides along it. As we pull up to her house, every light is on while silhouettes can be seen in every window. It's the event of the season! Even the driveway is packed with cars.

"Will we need to show our invitations?" I nudge a frowning Casey, whose jaw is almost on the floor. It's not a very attractive facial expression. There's nowhere to park on a street that usually hasn't one car parked on it anywhere at anytime.

I put the car in park, double parked.

"It's two a.m. and your parent's house is full of people, the kind that you find at the zoo making faces at the monkeys for hours. Your street is crowded with cars and there's nowhere to park within a

freeze-your-ass-off mile. People will be sleeping in ever corner of your house, relatives have traveled from miles around, from other states and countries. What DO you do?" I wonder aloud, all purely hypothetical of course. The light above the entrance goes on.

Someone opens the orange front door of Casey's house and waves. We both duck down. It's too late to just drive by. The waver is mom, Casey's mom that is. I'm not going inside no matter what. Never. Nut uh.

"Come in with me or I'll puke." she declares. It can't be that bad. I know it is that bad but I'm not going in so I don't really care. Sucks to be her. I sit up in my seat and I stare strait ahead while avoiding her gaze. After all, it's her house, her family, her problem, I tell myself. But it doesn't work.

I slowly turn my head and look at her. She hits me with those big, dark, innocent puppy dog eyes. She holds Angus up who then also looks at me with his dark, beady little, criminal "let me poop in your pockets again." eyes.

This is against the rules of the Geneva convention.

I'm going inside. I can't believe it. How'd it happen? Oh well, so much for pseudo-selfish resolve in the face of ferrets and friends.

"O.K. O.K." I crumble like I'm made of coffee cake, decaffeinated of course. I'm both a nice guy and a pushover. Two vs. one ig not fair. I had no chance, I can't believe it!

Sucks to be me now too. I care too much, which is impossible. Care has no limits, I care as much as I can. But it can't be that bad. I

know it is that bad but I have to go inside so I'm bolstering myself.

Inside will be all those older people who ask things like "What are you doing with your life?" And "What are your plans?" and "What have you been doing with yourself?"

I'd love to say that I've been wasting my life away living in a world composed of idiots like yourself who just ruin it for everyone else, that I plan to someday start my own ferret food/guinea pig food/fish food farm, and that the things I've been doing with myself involve large caliber circus canons, safety nets, midgets with helmets, and bulls eyes but it's really none of your business.

Where do these people get the right? I just dread invasion, which is what they really are doing, using the opportunity when one opens up a part of oneself to a stranger to condescend. Snobs and hobnobs. And I've always found that no matter what I say they'll just insult me anyway with the "On...that's...nice" snort. So I don't play the game.

Insecure people have to know what everyone's doing to soothe their immense feelings of inadequacy, consoling themselves with artificial airs of being better, above everyone. What losers, how sad they are.

More balanced individuals are polite, relaxed, secure in themselves while mindful but not reliant on the particulars of others. How rare they are.

"Just turn the car off." Casey sighs. In other words park the car in the middle of the street because there's nowhere else. Well, I'm not totally blocking traffic. I make sure though that I'm not blocking anyone parked next to us either, where by the way, we should be parking

if we weren't so late for the party. Never mind that we're not late, that we're not invited, and that it is almost four a.m.

I turn the car off, I turn the lights off, I turn the growing dread off.

"I'm going to like this." I smile badly. If I can't muster true anticipation, any kind of anticipation will do, even feigned expectancy. The only thing is that the actor does not know his lines. I'll improvise.

Casey rolls her eyes and gives me Angus, or is it Euan, or Tye? I've been trying to rotate the names equally. It's just so confusing sometimes. I stick IT, yes I admit that IT is so much easier to remember, into my coat pocket like a handkerchief or something. He's worn out by all this excitement.

"I want to see him moving on the ground sometime." Casey requests.

I look at her lost.

"What do you mean?" I search. I'm lost for sure.

"Well, ferrets don't have legs, right? They move like snakes." she tells me seriously.

"No. He's got legs." I laugh. Snakes? Ha, that's a good one. How absurd. How Casey. How come?

"What's so funny? I don't believe you, they move like snakes." she insists.

"It's true, I'm not lying." I implore. It's not my fault IT's so furry that IT's legs look almost non-existent.

"Is not."

"Is too." I'm sure.

"IS NOT!"

"IS!" I've seen with my own eyes.

"You know we have to go in there eventually." she almost whispers.

"I KNOW!" I know. We get out and look at each other before closing our respective doors to gauge each other's state of mind.

"This is going to be fun." she states without stressing any word in particular. My sentiments exactly. So here we go.

Up the flagstone path we walk; me with the black suitcase with the lead anvil inside and the black coat with the ferret inside and with the poop inside walking with the cowboy booted and jeans, white ski jacket wearing person with the strange ideas about ferrets alongside.

Before Casey can open the orange door that her mom was waving from it opens again by itself.

Her mother towers over us, she's facing inside while swaying back and forth. I wouldn't like a parent who'd be forever taller than me even when I'm fully grown in height, which I am. I'd always feel like a little kid. So much depends one's own background, so much doesn't. We are not our past, we are who we choose to be. Bright light from behind her beams out beyond us, casting her in shadow and us in shock. It's so obviously amazing.

"She's tanked." I whisper, "Your mom's drunk as a skunk." Casey elbows me in the chest because her parents don't drink, and Casey knows too well the intangible friction that exists between her mother and I. Well, it's actually the friction her mother creates due to her

overprotection of Casey, I guess. It's so subtle.

"Mom?" Casey blinks at the swaying, very tall and slim, short cut blonde haired lady in the long black evening gown.

I can't believe that Casey's mom is drunk. It's unimaginable but right before my eyes. She probably went crazy and totally let go, throwing all caution to the sea or however that stupid saying goes and had a whole glass of wine.

It's not the quantity but the strange chemistry between herself and alcohol that gives her no tolerance whatsoever. Then she falls asleep. All this I've heard from Kay, though her mother could secretly turn into a person I'd like when inebriated, but I doubt it.

Mrs. Barrow is a nice woman, she's just not particularly nice to me. Some people just don't click. I've often talked to her telephonically, for about half a minute, as we totally describe the weather, then there's that uncomfortable silence. Mrs. Barrow is a nice woman though she doesn't resemble Digger or Casey, yet. She will when they're taller. I look at Casey and no, her mom will never look like her, maybe Digger will when he's taller.

I like Clarrissa. She's an accountant for some big number cruncher firm. Nevertheless, I like her. Well, I try anyway. Maybe it's because I don't know her too well. Our relationship is one of familiar suspicion. I'm familiar with her ungrounded suspicions. There's a strange chemistry between me and Clarrissa, like between her and wine, that's probably based on those imagined, ungrounded suspicions.

Well, almost ungrounded and imagined.

There was the time I brought Casey home to her mother at two a.m. with a broken arm from, officially, an accident while leaving her friend's house via a forgotten flight of stairs. But unofficially, it was an accident while playing tag in Manor Park during a full moon. It was years ago yet I'll never be forgiven though innocent, that time at least.

I'm just glad I wasn't the one who chased her up a tree. I'm even more happy that I wasn't the same one she fell on from out of that tree and whose collarbone she broke with her arm that then broke. That's the theory anyway.

I can't even remember who it was she smashed, which isn't surprising at all.

If there's an aura of disaster around Casey, which there is, then there's a tornado of tension around Mrs. Barrow, which there most definitely is. It's not tangible, it's implied. It's the way she says my name when I call to talk to Kay. It's the way she squints when I tell her the truth, as though I'd lie about the weather! It's the way she tried to run me over when I was standing in her driveway one day. Nobody but me saw the smile on her face. I luckily only flipped over the hood. Then Casey, whom I was waiting for, came out and Mrs. Barrow acted concerned very convincingly. Never mind that it was night time and raining and I was wearing all black and Mrs. Barrow wasn't wearing her glasses and ect.

She did smile.

I also think that Casey's mom is wary of me because she fears I'll plunder her daughter, which I would never do, that's not the type of

relationship we share and that either of us wants. We're joined in a different sense, in a more intimate sense. We're buddies, we would die for each other. When we were young we made a blood pact, we cut each other and mixed gushing wounds. I'm in her veins and she's in mine.

Mrs. Barrow is like one of those housewives, though she's not a housewife, who saves their three hundred pound, foul mouthed, mutant, beer guzzling, tire changing husband, who gets squashed under the car along the roadside when the jack slips. But the wife somehow lifts the car off so he can crawl out. I don't know why she's like that but she is.

Casey's parents are in that age group where they're past being considered a young couple, whom I've never seen together, but not yet comfortable with approaching middle age, whenever that is. They should know it's all relative, like tonight, relatives from all over the place.

Mrs. Barrow turns around smiling, rolling her eyes at the two of us who can't believe our eyes, and takes a second to respond. I want to say that her long, black, long sleeved evening gown makes her look like a drapery, but she happens to be the mother of someone I know very well. I want to say that in a windstorm she'd need ankle weights to hold her down she's so slim and tall but ditto.

"You two!" she smiles warmly, which is quite different than when I alone am at the door, "You two again! I knew it!" She's not only tanked, she's scaring me with her compassion. Maybe she thinks I'm someone else.

"She thinks I'm someone else." I whisper.

"Mom, your drunk!" Casey scolds but deep down might be slightly amused. I never know for sure. I'm on the outside looking in. I nudge her in the back with my elbow.

"She thinks I'm someone else." I whisper louder. If I was a really opportunistic person I could take advantage of Mrs. Barrow's inebriation by planting some positive, subliminal suggestions in her mind. I could follow her around whispering things in her ear like "That Bob guy is so great!" and when she turns to see who is whispering, I could innocently wave.

But I'm not like that.

"Your mother isn't a drunk!" mom answers, straightening herself up and putting aside an empty glass. She's winding down, soon she'll be out cold. I've heard of other instances.

"It's been...seven months since I had anything alcoholic to drink." she recalls. "Did you just call your mother an alcoholic?"

"Mom, this is Bob. Remember him?" Kay just has to say. I hide behind her.

"Of course I know him, he's a devil that Bob. Is he here tonight?" she wonders. I wave over Casey's shoulder.

"Hi Clara!" I loudly exclaim. I've never called her that, I don't think anyone has.

"Did you pick up Casey at the airport?" Clarrissa wonders.

"Mom, you better go sit down. You're not yourself." Casey grumbles.

No one likes a drunk drapery, but Mrs. Barrow is not listening.

"Why do you like this Bob honey? He broke your arm." she whispers as though taking Kay aside for a private conversation about me but without taking her aside.

"I did not!" I insist over Casey's shoulder. It's hilarious. I could tell her it was actually me who broke Casey's nose when she was twelve but I've enough against me already.

"Come in and have some cake." Mrs. Barrow offers. She grabs Casey by the wrist, who grabs me by the wrist, and I grab the suitcase with the small boulder in it by the handle.

"Said the witch to Hansel and Gretel." I add.

"Stop." Kay warns me, pinching my wrist while squeezing it, "Mom, I do live here." Like second graders visiting the museum, we walk hands clasped. Casey is reluctant to enter a house full of relatives whom I don't know. The black vinyl suitcase is the most reluctant to enter of all of us.

"She gets like this sometimes." she explains, "And then falls asleep hiccupping."

We're hauled through a hall full of people who don't notice us because it's so crowded, and we're hauled into the empty, all white kitchen that I find disturbing. I can tell what kind of people they are, they don't think it's proper to hang out in the kitchen. They're aloof, the kitchen is considered a place of menial labor, they're plastic and typical.

Judging from the way people are dressed this is a special occasion.

I've no clue what that occasion would be though Casey's mom had told me earlier when she was her regular, stern self. I was

listening more to her tone of voice, from which I was sure I could sense her suspicion.

The house is mostly colonial inside just as I remember, with lots of antiques and varnished wood floors and such, but now there are people probably all over the house standing on every square inch of horizontal surface. That is, except for the kitchen. There's no music, the house sounds like a beehive.

The counters of the kitchen are packed with bottles of wine, champagne, beer, and other detrimental elixirs. I know, here and there I've tried all and found them to be very effectively detrimental.

We all let go of each other simultaneously.

"I think I'm going to pass out." Mrs. Barrow casually remarks. She leaves and says she'll be right back, several times, before leaving to be right back.

"Well, mom's showing a side of herself I've never seen before. When does she start dancing on the coffee table?" I carefully ask Casey, who's standing there looking at me without expression. Then her eyes piercingly wince once. I'm just trying to break the tension, break her tension, but it's not working.

"She's not my mother anymore." Kay decides.

A couple of older men, probably uncles, both in black suits with red ties and white shirts, appear in the kitchen. They pass by to refill their beverages and on the way out realize who Casey is. Except they call her Stacey, then kiss her on the cheek, saying "It's so good to see you," and give me the "Stacey, who's this handsome young fella you're

with?" handshake followed by the tap on the chin with their age spotted fists challenge to an arm wrestle sometime.

"Who were they?" I've got to know.

"My great uncles, or whatever they're called." she sniffles, splashing some water on her face from the sink tap.

"I don't know, they weren't that great." I mumble, trying to cheer her up.

"What? We never should have come in, they're all like this." she whimpers into a dry towel, then leans against the counter while puffing up her cheeks regretfully.

I, of course, know no one here.

"I don't know Stacey..." I begin, but two old ladies walk in, ladies with beehive like hairdos, horned rim glasses that make them look like insects, and hair colors just unnatural enough to make them appear as though someone has colored in a coloring book with unusual colors. One has pink hair, from a "just shy of flamingo pink" crayon no doubt, and the other has copper hair, from a "copper haired copperhead" crayon undoubtedly.

"Is that..." one tries to remember upon seeing Casey, "Tracy?"

They're both wearing pink and white flowered dresses which when coupled with the glasses and hairdos casts them as housewives out of the fifties who have not changed since they bought their first dishwasher and no one was going to stand in the way of American ideological domination of the world, especially little banana republics with the gall to be autonomous.

"Woah." I whisper aloud. They happen to be very sweet despite their cultural antiquity. After kissing Tracy on the cheek they turn their attention to me.

"And what are you doing with your life, Robert?" Aunt Something has to ask after introductions. Casey is exempt from the question and I alone am to be grilled. As though women aren't supposed to be doing anything with their lives. That's their cultural inflexibility shining through. Agh, it's great to be in a male dominated world where even the women and not just the men believe women are inferior. Actually it's sad. But I'm talking to people from the 1950's.

I look at Aunt Something with the pinkish hair. I want to say that my name is Napoleon and that I plan to plunder all of Europe from here to Waterloo, but she has really struck a nerve. What am I doing with my life?

I remember luckily that I know no one here so I can say whatever I want.

"Well, right now I'm working for NASA, down in Florida." I nod, grabbing Casey's hand so she'll play along. She jerks it away and looks at me like I've confessed to animal necrophilia or something just as horrendous. She mouths "NASA?" to me in shock.

"Yes." I answer aloud.

"That's very nice." the other aunt replies. Of course it is, you're not even listening to me, I tell myself.

I continue, "I stir fuel for the rockets and once they let me go up for a ride, and a spacewalk on the moon."

"That's very nice." they both repeat, smiling.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" I echo, "You have to be very, very careful on the moon, especially when it's shaped like a banana and there's so little room to walk."

They leave, telling Tracy that she has grown into a beautiful woman, that she should get married soon, spend her life trapped domestically, and that there are such nice dishwashing machines these days to insure the American way of life. Talk about a time warp.

"What?" I defensively grin to a not so amused Casey. She's kind of looking upset.

"That wasn't very nice." she scolds, poking me in the chest for punctuation.

"Ow. They weren't even listening to me. And they don't even know your name." I say, retreating backwards. Sure, take it all out on me because your relatives project names onto your face.

"Who were they?" she suddenly laughs, humorously annoyed. If they are who they say are, they are Casey's aunts and they are cast and doomed. Typical, I tell myself, most people just don't keep growing but they should.

"They're from the costume party down the street." I answer, "They're pretending that people don't have to change." Casey looks at me like I'm talking in a language only I understand, which is true sometimes.

"Where's my little girl? Is she beating up Bob again?" someone hollers from the hall. It's Chuck, Kay's dad, Mr. Barrow.

Casey spins around and hugs him as he enters the kitchen. He hugs

her and I wish I could catch the moment on film forever. Well, not really I would rather have snapshots of Mrs. Barrow on the coffee table.

"Daddy, nobody knows who I am!" Casey whimpers.

Chuck's a gray haired, black eyebrowed, jeans, red sweatshirt and white socks wearing guy. He's always smiling and offering free advise, just little unasked for hints on life.

"And I've divorced mom." she adds while he tries to lift her case out of curiosity. He jokingly cannot.

Mr. Barrow knows things like: when you're around high voltage keep one hand in your pocket at all times to prevent, if you're accidentally electrocuted by accidentally grabbing something electrifying, the current from passing from one arm to the other through the chest, which might cause the heart to stop beating.

Chuck's crazy about me because of various favors I've performed in the line of duty throughout the years, like when I took care of the dog for week while they went on vacation. He'll never know that I lost the damn dog upstate for a few days. I think he also likes the fact that I annoy his wife, unintentionally of course.

"They don't know what they're missing." he consoles, "And I've also divorced your mother tonight." Nothing upsets him, which means he's likely to explode in rage one day for no reason. He smiles at me.

"Why Mr. Redford, so nice to see you again." he acknowledges with a vigorous handshake. Mr. Barrow doesn't drink at all, but I can see how tonight might be a possible exception, just for anesthesia. But I guess he's use to his relatives.

"So how'd everything go?" he asks collectively.

"Fine. Fine." some old uncle type guy, black suited, with thick, scary, red hair answers as he staggers into and through the kitchen, disappearing into the hall.

I tell Mr. Barrow that everything went well to, at, and from the airport while raising an eyebrow of curiosity at our disappeared cameo/walk-on role cast stranger.

"Except we lost the car in the parking lot." Casey has to remember. After smiling at some other refueling relatives who wouldn't stop patting Chuck on the back repeatedly before leaving, he looks at me with the same puffy cheeked expression Kay just wore a few minutes ago.

"You should park near something you'll remember." he offers as free advise, then bends down, slightly whispering . "Don't think these are MY relatives, they came with my wife."

Casey looks at the big, white frosting cake on the kitchen table, the one that says "Happy $50^{\hbox{th}}$ Anniversary Grama and Grampa" that I just now see. That's what it's all about.

"Daddy, where's Grama and Grampa?" she wonders. Chuck points to the ceiling.

"They're sleeping in my bedroom, in my bed." he tells us.

"They're not at their own anniversary party?" I ask. After all, it's such a formal and large gathering.

"Hey, they're lucky they can even eat their corn flakes these days without falling asleep in them." he admits . "Where'd my wife go?"

"That way." Casey points, and Mr. Barrow is gone, muttering something

<u>Spelunking</u> Robert Cullen

about "Should have put a plastic cover on the mattress."

"We have to get out of here." she swears, "Things are not the way they should be. It's more than jet lag. I feel like I've landed in a place almost like where I should have landed. I'll go crazy if one more person makes up a name for me." She starts rummaging through her case, which will never close again, her stuff inside has decompressed. I don't know if she's talking to herself or to me, I just stand crunching a piece of ice in my mouth trying to see how loud I can sound.

"Are you listening?" she angrily wants to know while putting something in her coat pocket. Yes, I am listening, sort of.

I look at her puzzled, I need clarification of a particular thing.

I understand the universe that's almost exactly parallel suspicion. I wake up every day to a new reality, who doesn't? The dead maybe? I doubt it, they're on some different plane. The living dead?

Yes, the tombstone worshipers and the scaly herds of stagnancy.

"These people are your relatives, right?" I hope to confirm.

"Right." she confirms, "But they haven't seen me for years because every time there is a gathering of my mom's brothers and sisters there is always a fight. Then no one talks for years."

"What do they fight over?" I wonder.

"Inheritance." she nods. Oh, of course. I don't want to know the details so I dare not pursue the situation. I only want one dysfunctional family in my life, my own, and I say that because I have no choice,

You can choose everything you want in your life, relatively, what you want to be and who your friends are particularly, but you can't

choose your family, you can't choose relatively. There may be a universal constant for those dissatisfied domestically, the best choice being sometimes to simply leave.

I'm not sure if it's a parallel universal constant.

Casey picks up keys from the counter, writes a short note that's to mom and dad whom I still haven't seen together, sticks it on the frig, and we're out of her house via the back porch because everyone is an impostor, maybe except for Casey's dad but he's got nowhere to sleep tonight, so he doesn't count. He's palletless and real.

Stumbling around the house in the darkness, we each breath a sigh of relief for having escaped though I'm more relieved that Casey's relieved because, after all, she's new to this alternative reality thing.

"Well Stacey, Tracey, or Casey, whoever you are, what's the plan, man?" I inquire.

"The plan is to meet at your house, take my car from there, and drive anywhere." she reveals. It's good to have plans, it's said that if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. I guess we won't be needing directions.

I get in my car, take off down the street, and watch as she figures out how to get onto the street from the middle of her driveway that is full of cars. She said she could, and I believe. She cuts across her lawn in her parent's white B.M.W. convertible, using her neighbor's flower bed and driveway to gain access to the street. Driving to my house only takes a few minutes. Somehow she's there before me though she hadn't passed me.

I park across the street from my parent's yellow, red trimmed, three story house. It's a dead-end street, which is a glaring coincidence. After locking my maroon rustbucket, I knock on her driver's side window. It rolls down electrically while she fumbles through the glove compartment with her other hand.

"You drive like the Pope's dead mother." she teases. This is from someone who, when I first went for a ride with her after she had just gotten her license, decided to broadside a state police car that, granted, had skidded through an intersection . But she had run the light too.

The funny thing is that the officer pleaded with Casey not to say it was his fault, he didn't have his lights or sirens on. In reality she was driving triple the speed limit, purposely scaring the crap out of me, and I was pale in fear of my life.

She's a disaster magnet and I'm a disaster victim on long term contract. She gave in to the officer's pleading, provided she got something in return. His hat is hanging in her bedroom, a bribe. He wrote up a report about a faulty traffic signal light, she has a strange memento, and he still has a job. And Istill have to drive with her.

Hoping Ciaran comes back from vacation soon, I put Angus, Euan, Tye, and IT inside my house. There's no sense in risking his life too.

"I know a lot more about the Pope then you think I do." I warn when I return, after I take my position in the passenger seat. She's not listening, she's still rummaging.

"What exactly are you looking for?" I ask as she comes up empty handed, "You're always looking for things and never finding them."

"I'm making sure none of those stupid, smelly trees are in here." she informs. I'd throw them out too, they make me car sick. I put on my seat belt and she looks at me almost insulted.

"What's the matter, you don't think I'm a good driver?" I get from her like I always get form her whenever I put a seat belt on when she's driving. I truly don't think she's a good driver, but I'm a gentleman, I won't tell her.

"Why do you always ask me that?" I growl, "You're wearing your seat belt. And do you know that more people have been killed in vehicle related accidents than in all the wars in all of history?"

"So?" she easily dismisses the incongruity and the death toll.

"SO?" I repeat.

"Forget it, just forget it. Do whatever you want to. I don't care." she sulks. Oh, now I've done something wrong! It's not my fault people like to kill each other with their machines. Some people get so moody. These are the times when I want to hit her on the head with a rubber mallet because she likes to upset me by making me think I've upset her, and because like a sucker I eventually fall for it.

She has a mischievous side I can't understand, sort of a need to test me for no reason other than to see how I'll respond. That's why I'm going to get a huge mallet and thump her on the head with it.

I get mad because she should know better and know me by now, which she does, and I get confused because she behaves so mysteriously.

All from a seat belt and a belief that accidents are deliberate and only the driver's car is involved. She doesn't realize that there are

surprises.

"You know, accidents happen unexpectedly, that's why they're called accidents, otherwise someone would prevent the accident." I try to explain.

Never mind that ultimately cars are deliberate constructions.

"I'm not talking to you." she decides. End of conversation.

Oh, if I had a mallet! Which reminds me of a martial arts instructor I had who dared anyone in the class to do just that to him. Actually it wasn't a rubber mallet, it was a hammer.

He explained how a Tai Chi master has gained a level of tactile sensitivity so refined that the master cannot be touched by any punch, kick, or weapon. Untouchability happens because the master can feel any possible impact beforehand due to the disturbance of the air right before the strike and responds so quickly, by moving out of the way merely by a few inches, that nothing can tough a Tai Chi master.

Not even if someone snuck up behind that master with a ball peen hammer trying to strike him or her on the head with it, so he claimed.

"'Forget it.' she growled, mean person that she is inside, with total disregard for his feelings.'" I sob for pretend, breathing heavily through my mouth and letting my bottom lip be pulled in and out.

"How was he to know that she had over two hundred different personalities?" I add.

There's no answer, she just pushes the hair out of her eyes and with tires chirping, takes off down my street to nowhere in particular. She eventually gets out of these shadowy moods. She needs some serious re-railing of her train.

I look around at the luxurious interior of the vehicle, the complex gauges, the brightly lit instruments around the steering wheel, the plush, gray, obscure carpeting, the expensive German radio. Fifty years ago this same company would have been making a tank instead of a sports coupe. Half the people on earth wouldn't mind having this as their house, they wouldn't mind having any place to live in at all.

I begin the always tedious search for a decent radio station while Casey runs stop signs, technically, by just slowing down without fully stopping or coming close to fully stopping, on empty, dark, suburban streets which lead nowhere. Meanwhile the majority of the world will never be able to afford to buy a Bravarian car even if they really wanted to because eighty percent of he world's wealth is in the hands of only a privileged five percent of the human race. My math isn't the best but I think the numbers may be even more staggering.

So much for equality.

"Do you mind not distracting me while I'm driving?" she insists. I'm only looking for a good station, butch.

"I'm not listening to that...that...stuff." she adds. It's country music. If I keep my mouth shut I won't make things any worse. I never listen to country music but now I'm in the mood.

"Every song sounds like the next one." she believes. This is sometimes true. I can't hold my tongue.

"What do you get when you hear a country music song played backwards?"

I ask Miss Attitude. She doesn't answer of course, she's above country music.

"You get your job back, your best friend back, your horse back, your dog back, your spouse back, and your luck back." I answer. It's great to have rhetorical conversations that aren't meant to be that way.

She's slightly smiling but still silent. I'm hopeful. I continue scanning for a good station while we drive to I don't care where, but to hopefully someplace where I've never been before, via a highway leading east of our tribal grounds, towards of all places, Connecticut.

I find a rock station, the kind caught permanently in the sixties and first two years of the seventies.

"This is called rock and roll on a respirator." I joke, quoting some other station. She turns and looks at me vehemently. She's a good actor, testing her limits, playing to a captive audience. I know her well enough to guess that when she acts mad for no reason she's indirectly asking for help.

"Darling, is there something on your mind tonight?" I patronize.

"You're patronizing me." she believes, "You're always patronizing me." I love her exaggerated, showy indignation. The little games we play, the way we while the problems of life away each day.

"Am not." I maintain, "Darling, where are we going?" There's no answer, it's a mystery. I love a good mystery.

"The suspense is killing me." I whisper. "No it's not. Yes it is. I'm not crazy. No, I'm the one that's crazy." The multiple personality thing doesn't faze her at all, she just suppresses a smile halfway and accelerates farther past the speed limit. The message: leave me alone if you're going to tease me or I'll break the sound barrier.

"Aren't we going a little fast?" I have to ask her. So, drastically, she slows down and looks at me annoyed.

"I'll kick you out of this car and run you over." she partly laughs, partly evilly grins. So I shut up though she's fooling around. Maybe she has part of her mother's knack for almost running me over, I don't want to find out. For a while we're both silent, exchanging glances while trying not to let the other know.

Where are we going? I'm being kidnaped. It's four thirty a.m. and tonight's one of those weird nights when no one feels tired despite the time, Well, we don't anyway.

I remember when young, upstate during the summer, my sister had a small loom, basically a hollow square with teeth-like pegs around it. It made pot holders if one put the time in, so I did. I spent a whole night alone, at about ten years of age, weaving a pot holder with the colorful materials provided, and boy was I tired the next day, a satisfied kind of tired.

I remember it so clearly. Thot night may have been the first night I accomplished something really fulfilling, not an accomplishment so much of completion but an accomplishment through the process of dedicated effort. I couldn't have slept for any reason.

Now I feel almost as weird as I did then, a possession by an unusual source of inspiration, an intangible muse.

"We never did have cake." I remember.

"You don't like cake." she reminds me, accelerating. Every word she speaks is costing me in terms of speed. True, I don't like cake,

but I wasn't even presented with the opportunity to refuse politely.

"You don't like anything. You don't even like me." she accuses, adding ten more miles per hour.

"Of course I like you!" I incredulously respond.

"But only as a friend." she whines.

"So what if only as a friend, you like me only as a friend." I point out, beginning to clench me teeth, "What's wrong with friendship? I'd rather have a good friend all my life than a distant lover." Of course it would be great to have both a friend and a lover in one. What's up here?

What's going on with her? The problem relates to seat belts I must not wear and accountability for things I have no control over. And feelings which aren't there. It's not my fault, whatever is bothering her. I know she doesn't see me as someone to romantically get involved with, neither do I see her in that way, it's almost a thought. She's exacerbating my confusion about her for a reason.

"But you don't think I'm pretty." she sniffles. I will never understand Casey's emotions.

"I get the feeling something else is wrong." I can only say.

"YES, of course something else is wrong you idiot!" she barks, slowing down, "Forget it, just forget it."

Finally! She has admitted something else is wrong and it's no coincidence that we're driving now at a safer speed. Some people have a strange way of letting things be known.

I could start the "No, tell me," s but such persistence only leads

to problems being prematurely exposed and more of a mess, especially with Casey. I know from experience, there's a certain amount of fermentation needed.

"You alright?" I ask, which is stupid to do but I ask anyway. There's no answer, which is an answer. She's disturbed. I know someone's silence is as important as a scream, and I can hear her loud and clear.

I fumble with the radio for distraction because there's really nothing I can presently do. She's not direct, she will not be forced. I will listen when she's ready, whenever what she's processing bubbles up.

Hell, who am I anyway, Atlas? There's enough weight on my shoulders. If I unloaded all the turmoil that's inside me all at once I'd probably crush her, and vice versa. I give her the respect I would want because my troubles are mine and inevitably part of me. To take what she's not willfully giving is rape.

People can screw other people up so horribly by not respecting. In most cases it seems so intentional. If anyone has hurt her, well, I'm going to have to hunt them down like the dog that person is. I'll kill everyone they love and let them live, figuratively of course.

I know what's bothering her is cumulative, it's just that kind of energy, cause nonspecific yet there. We drive speechless. Signs race by of places I've never heard about. The radio plays a country song that moves with the passing road beneath us. I yawn, stretch, my eyes having become heavy. The sound of the radio, the tires, and the engine becomes the crashing of waves constantly and I can't fight true sleep.

I tried to build a castle when I was some age around fourteen while in the Catskills, the hinterlands.

First I scouted for the perfect place, and in a swamp I broke ground, on a high, dead tree covered knoll so as to be above the water. I excavated a hole about five feet square and four feet deep.

Alone I carried rocks as large as I could manage across that swamp, innumerable rocks. At times I got sucked down to my waist due to the weight of myself, my rock, my dream, and the softness of the green, muddy mire. It's surprising I didn't get malaria and wasn't suffocated in that humid, buzzing, gassy stretch lying between my excavation, my future fortress, and my source of rock.

The location was perfect. The swamp was to be the moat, I was to be the protected king, a true king who had earned the position in a realm where he was the only subject. A person can only be his or her own king. Anything else is oppression.

The king built the cellar floor, the cellar walls, and the cellar stairs. The king never finished that particular castle, the king was driven away by the mosquitoes.

I lost a lot of blood before my exile, but it was well worth the bloodletting. The value was in the toil and the intimacy gained with the surrounding landscape; the hardness of the gray, lichen covered stone, the muddy allure of the ground beneath the thick grasses, the sense of life all around filling every sense, the strange birds calling, the burping of fermenting ground, and the green, slippery soup.

I was dedicated to the idea of perseverance. I still am. I was

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the king who experienced all his servant's sufferings because I was also the servant, toiling until I was dizzy from fatigue towards a goal which was only mine. It was the process not so much the outcome that mattered.

I haven't changed in that sense at all. There are other castles nowadays, some defensive, some symbolic of goals to be striven for, some, like in childhood, there for the sole purposeless pleasure of building. At night I used to dream of the swamp castle finished, impenetrable. In my dreams, by a stroke of luck, an eighteen wheeled trailer truck carrying castle building materials crashed on the highway which was thirty feet through the bushes, that highway being Route 145.

I wasn't upset at all that the swamp castle never was completed, that wasn't the point of its construction. It was enough to be able to envision it completed. I enjoyed the building process more. I would always build castles in my mind years afterwards. It was the magnitude of the endeavor which I couldn't resist. If there was a pile of rocks I'd come across in the woods there was a castle waiting my efforts. It was the doing, the assembling.

The fun was scavenging along fallen rock walls in the forest for that perfectly shaped next stone to remember or to haul somewhere, anywhere, just to exert myself while, during the rummaging, finding mysterious fossils, unhappily awakened snakes, and startled mice.

I could build a whole castle mentally by sitting down and looking at the stones before me. The swamp castle may have sunk into oblivion but I still go on building, dreams nowadays of safety from the whims of others, of reaching for my potential, except it seems today that

the only material. I have on hand is sand. I've somehow lost the freedom to wander and collect as I desired, I've somehow been relocated to a place where the goals sought are being controlled by the materials provided.

The king must regain his realm of one, but his captors don't realize that his freedom is inevitable, natural, and that eventually one gets fed up living with sand castles so vulnerable to the tide. For sand is just bread crumbs.

I look out at the sea, the ocean, the horizon, where the blue-gray water meets the blue-white sky. I sigh relieved, because in a few years the sand will be blown away and I will know life without reliance on those who do not choose to care to care. Looking over the choppy water, I see that the winter weak sun has just risen behind the clouds to vaguely light the morning. Waves lightly crash a rocky, dark granite, gnarled by time shore eagerly. Below from where I am, which is inside the car, a figure sits throwing small pebbles at the ocean. I don't know how long Casey's been down there or even where we are.

The car is on a road close to the water. She pulled over to the side next to the rusty guardrail. To the left is a rising gray cliff face the road has been blasted through. This could be a state park, there are no houses or telephone poles. There's just the sea to the right and exposed rock with trees overhanging to the left.

I have an idea of what's wrong with her now, it has to do with why.

That's the first word that impresses me from the surroundings and though

I don't think the question arises from an external source or is answered

by an external source, I do know it is reflected by this place.

The car clock reads 6:07 a.m.

From the car I slip over the rusty guardrail and down a short, brown trail in a hillside of silver, waving, wild hay. I walk to her and stand to the side, slightly in front of her. For a while I just watch the water punishing the black rock shoreline. She doesn't stop casting pebbles.

"It'll never work." she shouts above the wind and water, "It just keeps swallowing them up and pushing them back to shore. It doesn't care."

To me the pebbles are individuals fighting a sea of difficulties, individuals striving to attain the freedom of the open ocean, fish escaping an aquarium.

"How'd you find this place?" I wonder while grabbing a handful of the black, pebbly beach.

"My dad grew up around here." she tells me as I too throw pebbles into the steel blue waves.

"I think I'm going crazy." she adds matter of factly. The water is steel blue and frothy, and by the way, I'm going crazy. Super crazy people don't know if they are, so I'm relieved.

I sigh into the wind, "It's not that bad, I went crazy a long time ago." while grabbing some more of the shore.

This is a nice place to go a little crazy, to lose one's mind in favor of a view that's more inclusive. There aren't any gulls to witness, it's nice and peaceful. I finish off casting symbolic individuals against an unstoppable consensus of disinterest and sit down next to her. No, one pebble can't stem the tide, a pebble must do the

best that pebble can do while joining with other pebbles to form a stone of relatively lasting permanence.

I trace designs in the dark gravel that turns into large rock as the gravel reaches the water. A good place to build a castle this is, a shoreline of more than enough material and an infinity across the water.

"Last week at school I woke up wondering if it's possible to ever be satisfied and it's been eating at me ever since." she softly tells me and all around us. "Do you think so?"

"I can be happier, I can be a better person." I guess and know.

"Satisfied?" she specifically wants to know.

"No, I hope not." I have to admit. Across the board satisfaction would be a death.

The air is salty and sweet, a paradox. The wind cannot be denied yet somehow it caresses anyway in spite of its might.

"So then what do you want to do if you don't want to be satisfied?"

"I want to fly away." I smile, "To a place where I've always belonged." Neither can my flight be denied.

She knows why I feel so. No matter who people are, if they're bad for you say bye-bye forever, even family. Maybe even especially family.

The silver waving grasses behind us speak like a thousand voices agreeing in soothing hushes.

"What's the most important thing to you in all of life?" she wonders, grabbing some more pebbles. She doesn't ask easy questions. I'm silent for a while thinking. The wind racing off the water is thrilling.

"The individual person." I finally answer. Yes, definitely, the

person as an individual is the most important thing to me, the place to start.

"I've no clue what I'm going to do with my life." she secretly reveals in an even softer voice, throwing all her pebbles at once, uncovering what's been churning within, the heart of the matter.

AGHH! I can't bear the implications inherent to that topic. What are you going to do? What is anyone going to do?

I faint backwards to lay down in pseudo shock. She follows suit.

"I'm sorry." she pants, frustrated. I open my eyes and look at her seriously.

"You know, you can't find the answers to everything just by posing one question or answering one question." I hope and know, "You're going to live your life and become the best human being you can be."

"That's an answer?" she smiles doubtfully. Yes it is, after all, it's only one question. If better answers are needed find questions that can be answered more specifically.

We are not waves destined to crash ashore, our questions point to the open ocean's green-blue mystery and the sky's cerulean depths.

I shrug. Maybe it isn't an answer, maybe it is. Just looking at the sky and ocean is enough to make me feel lighter, more towards weightlessness. It's beautifully sad that I don't have that many answers or those wings to fly away into either what's above or beyond yet, wings to be created as a result of my own efforts, wings of freedom to carry me away from serfdom, yet.

And the waves crash ashore but we are not waves condemned to crash

ashore, condemned to serfdom, surfdom. We must not be pebbles so easily lost to the immenseness of the sea or victims to be crushed by the pounding waves of consensus and compliance.

"Do you know that there's the same percentage of salt in our blood as there is in the ocean?" Casey informs me while trying to balance a pebble on the tip of my nose, "Or is it amniotic fluid?" Freedom is inherent to our nature either way.

"I guess it all depends on the person and the ocean." I grin as she attempts to stack another pebble on top of the one already on my nose, "And which womb we're talking about." The ocean was once home.

On the way home I cannot help but notice how special the liaison I share with Casey is, independent but in constant contact uniquely. We are forever incorporating changes into our separate lives yet our common ties weather the deluges of distractions. Through the flux we remain—enduring, endearing. I'm positive the future hasn't been written. It's nice to be reminded not to fall victim to the ebb and flow of the tides in our lives. We don't have to be carried along to just crash ashore, we can move by decision, we can be responsible, we can choose how to exist ourselves.

There's so much to do. Driving while Casey sleeps, I can sense a temporary balance within her and within myself, yet always neverlasting luckily. Arriving at my house around dinner time, she tells me to think of something interesting to do tomorrow, hands me something, my present,

then drives off abruptly. End of conversation.

The present is in a blue pouch. The present is anything, it is possibility. I undo the drawstring to take whatever it is out. It's a palm sized crystal ball. I have to sit down on the curb to think for a minute. Back to that old, sweet gnawing of my skull from the inside. The Frenchman is in the vicinity, maybe practicing his swordsmanship on the front, brown, winter faded lawn.

I hold the clear sphere in cupped hands, I cannot ignore the obvious. No, the future hasn't been written. Yet we've been told to be grateful that we are alive at all, that we were born at all. As though our lives have been written, as though there's nothing one can do after conception. That a whole life is a was and guilt should permeate existence. We are saturated constantly with the proclamation that everything has already happened, that today isn't occurring, tomorrow isn't about to occur, and yesterday is every day. The message is be existed and not existing, be still, be inanimate, be cast. No.

We'll never, in all our separate and collective lives, be able to repay the previous generation for our conceptions, so they tell us. We shouldn't have to. It's a sadistically futile request, so we'll not even try. Instead we will fly. Instead possibility calls, the future is not written, crystal balls are clear. This is the obvious that attacks me at the moment. The future isn't made of anything other than ifs and possibilities. We project what we want to see into our crystal balls.

It is said that one swallow doesn't make a summer, or something synonymous. Meaning that the whole cannot be looked at with a narrow

perspective without losing the sense of wholeness. A swallow is a part of summer but isn't summer at all. A conception does not a parent make, a parent is a verb and not a single action. Conception is a swallow, an aspect but not a totality. This cycle of generational guilt imbuement must be broken.

I am here and I am me, overflowing. When I present myself with the fact that "I'm so lucky I even exist" my voice within adds "Of course, so is everyone else, but what's going to happen now?" Living is finding out. What's to be is written as it occurs, in our own handwriting, with our own anticipation guiding, with our sense of yesterday steadying, and with our sense of now impelling. If everything becomes done already, and each person has that ability to deny change, tomorrow is wasted, the next day becomes an imitation of the past, a forgery. But tomorrow cannot be denied, time is a juggernaut. What's to be is the hope that things will better. If the possibilities of tomorrow are ignored so is living actively, effectively, and the waves will crush eagerly. Tomorrow comes no matter how narrow and unchanging we might foolishly allow ourselves to become.

Reptiles live almost still, stagnant lives, unaware of tomorrows and therefore hopeless, hiding under heavy boulders of consensus in caves of their own construction. They are pebbles which have allowed themselves to be separately lost and therefore subject to the tide's whim. What's to come has not at all been written, the future is there ripening within us, in that mysterious place known as expectation. We have tomorrow, what will become of it is totally our choice. And when tomorrow does

feel written because of the scaly people around one who have decided it is, I remember that my blood is warm, and though I have a potentially reflexive and reptilian, to the individual unsympathetic origin, my eyes are open as are the higher faculties of my salty and eager to be oceanic being, and that in time one can soar beyond lies, denials, and deceptions.

I will stay true to myself, though it's cold outside. The world we've found ourselves in is cold to us today, scaly. The red siege flags snap in the arctic gales, one realizes an individual can get so defensive due to those who lie without. We must escape and learn to be more open to others, we must change. For right now we live in conditions which are meant to divide each other and meant for us to regard ever another as a threat. Pebbles are being reared to deliberately stay separate, vulnerable, to live lives that are callously breadcrumby, slimily subterranean, and solitarily submarine.

I must go into my house, seeking shelter in a suburban construction obviously cave-like. I haven't any choice, yet. I'm within circumstances beyond my control, for now. I will make things change, I will fight my fight, which is a forward movement towards self realization.

We're drowning for spectators at the moment. The harder we swim the more violently they shake the water, the more discouraging they want the waves to become. But we can't stop swimming and float to our destructions, to be pounded against the shore. It is not who we have to be. Not only do we choose how to exist ourselves in the world but we also choose how to respond to the stresses in our lives.

A life of constant comfort is an illusion. Though it's a cold place

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in which we now reside, I hear a rumor within and I'm sending that information without: that tomorrow is coming and so too are the swallows that have been missing from our summers because we will be free.

My friends and I will indeed find something interesting to do. Carefully and deliberately, first just in small hops and short leaps, we'll begin flying. Living.

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